

Oh Canada

On June 8, 1958, the S.S. Waterman docked in Quebec City, with *The Plains of Abraham* looming high above the docks. The S.S. (Steam Ship) Waterman was a converted troop and supply carrier of the Holland America Line. It had left the Dutch port of Rotterdam, about a week earlier. As the last of the big cables that moored the S.S. Waterman to her berth fell away from the sides of the ship, large tugs gracefully and silently guided the ship into the Dutch canal that connected the harbour to the sea. On the pier stood hundreds of people, mostly relatives, as the last ties to our fatherland faded in arms that pumped goodbye, with hearts that bled as family and friends disappeared from view, and tears that flowed freely with each farewell blow of the ship's whistle. The journey eventually became a pitching and rolling rollercoaster ride through north Atlantic high seas, with generous portions of fog and cold, in sharp contrast to our balmy and sunny departure from the Netherlands through the English Channel. The ship, however, was a comfortable ship with many lounges, a movie theatre, and plenty of room on deck just to sit and relax or go for a stroll. It was also the S.S. Waterman's last voyage. She had an appointment with a scrapyard right after her trip to Canada.

A month earlier, I had pocketed a pale yellow Dutch and international vaccination certificate which declared me fit for immigration and which was approved by the Municipal Department of Public Health of the city of Zwolle. The certificate was kept safely in my pocket beside my own Dutch passport, which proudly declared I was valid for "*de gehele wereld, le monde entier*, and the whole world." The Queen's Commissioner of the Dutch province Overijssel, signed the historic document (at least in my eyes it was historic), dated April 29, 1958. I was *Homeward Bound* to a place I would come to love and appreciate as Canada, my new home and native land. Perhaps this new home would also help me find the answer to an apparent paradox.

As I look back upon my arrival in Canada, why did I consider my journey to Canada, an unknown destination for a young boy of 13, a journey that was *homeward* bound? Despite deeply rooted memories in my former homeland of the Netherlands, a fact just recently stirred up again as I watched a documentary on the Netherlands, I have always considered Canada my home. Yet my heart struggles with a longing for the past, a longing that remains rooted in a sense of belonging to history, belonging to yesterday, while another struggle competes for equal attention, that is a longing for tomorrow and a belonging to that grand adventure of another day and another year, when I was very young. I do not dismiss these struggles as a mere inevitability of dual citizenship, but I am a citizen of Canada and not a citizen of the Netherlands. It remains a tug-of-war, however, between images of ancient stone city dwellings and log cabins in remote temperate forests. The inner struggle is painted in vibrant colours over pictures of canals, windmills, turrets, and knights in shining armour, as well as a remote and wild coast of Vancouver Island's Pacific Rim, endless prairies, winding highways through the Northland of Ontario, and the tranquil comforts of a Maritime wooden roadside chapel. Call me a sentimental fool, but could it be I want the best of both worlds, the old and the new, European and Canadian, the civilized and the frontier? Somehow I believe the answer lies in deeper feelings, feelings stirred up by special events along another journey, that is, my spiritual journey. The events of my spiritual journey all point to a mysterious city, a distant past of ancient patriarchs, a fulfilling presence of escape into the beauty of drawing and fine arts, and at last a promising future that points to this mysterious city not built by humans hands. It is the eternal City of God.

I may not have been able to put words to those feelings when I was just thirteen years old, nor did I know what the City of God was. Yet, the earthly memories of steaming towards distant horizons during June of 1958, remain as vibrant and promising as they were the day I first sighted a land called Canada. Somehow I believed then and believe now that Canada would be a stepping stone towards that mysterious *other* city.

But that was not quite how I saw Canada in June of 1958.

From 1957 to 1963, John Diefenbaker served as Prime Minister in Canada. It was a time marked by an unprecedented wave of western European immigration, an immigration encouraged and openly solicited by Diefenbaker's Conservatives. My father regularly received fat envelopes from the Diefenbaker government. Each envelope was filled with brochures about this magical, mystical land of opportunity called Canada. My father bound a large scrapbook into which he carefully pasted bright colourful pictures of Rocky Mountains, Mounted Police, Native Indians with spectacular ceremonial dress, cities crowded with gleaming office towers, the vast prairies on the mid-west, and the endless bounty of a rich land. So it was in 1958, that Chris and Cornelia Verstraete with their six children embarked on an adventure of a lifetime. I was the second oldest of three boys and three sisters. In order of age, their names are Beert, Gerrit, Lida, Baldwin, Annelies, and Sylvia. A seventh child, Ingrid, was born in 1960, in Wallaceburg, Ontario, two years after our family arrived in Canada.

It seems providential that my first account of our voyage across the Atlantic Ocean was written in 1967. It was a short manuscript of twenty-two pages, lost a few years later, only to be found again by my daughter Karen. Providential in that I must include the detailed account of our immigration in this story of mine. Fascinated by these early writings, Karen faithfully kept them until I began this account. As I read the pages of that manuscript, it seemed right to include them in *Oh Canada*. What follows is their content, beginning on a cold foggy morning somewhere off the coast of Newfoundland in 1958...

I suppose even the sun could have one of those careless and lifeless mornings, void of ambition and desire to touch even the humblest forms of life. This was one of those mornings. We all have such mornings and I was no exception. Even the very thought of effort was tiring and depressing. However, I managed to make it to my usual place near the bow of the S.S. Waterman. A thick blanket of fog greeted everyone including myself and all the other early risers. Tentacles of spray and mist spread like gloved fingers through dark troughs between endlessly slow waves. I could barely see. Deck gear stood in grey lifeless shapes stacked against bulkheads. As I looked over the side of the ship I could see the fog roll silently in front of my eyes, parting for but a brief moment to allow the ship to pass through, only to close again moments later behind a frothy wake at the stern. I remember awesome feelings of timelessness and suspended animation that belonged exclusively to the realms of fog and complete darkness.

A few more passengers staggered into the wet early morning air. They joined me in a silent vigil as we stared into the fog. Tiny drops of water began to collect in our hair and clung to our clothes. Within minutes we looked as wet as all the painted surfaces on the ship. I poked my finger into the grey mist and wrote my initials GV, on the slate-grey side of a ventilation shaft only to see the letters disappear immediately in tiny rivulets down the side. They were joined by others as they ran down together along a slippery hull towards the sea. It was an eerie sight, this small bunch of passengers huddled together like some lost platoon of non-descript soldiers, on D-Day as they leaned on the railings of an aging ship, their eyes fixed on nowhere. The weight of their grey and dark-blue duffel coats made them look tired. But in their hearts burned the bright warming fires of expectation. They were immigrants. And I was one of them.

I pulled my coat tightly around my neck as I tried to bury my head deeper into its soft and warm lining. Even though I was only thirteen, memories of that voyage have remained remarkably clear in my mind nine years later. Despite thick fog and bone-chilling cold, I was lost in my own thoughts, thoughts of a new country that lay somewhere beyond the fog, a country of high mountains, remote wilderness, prairies, waterfalls, and Mounties everywhere.

A sudden blast of the ship's foghorn tore the misty silence to pieces. Everyone on deck was startled out of their foggy thoughts. The blast lingered for a while, as if the ship cried out desperately to the sun to penetrate the morning and bring some light. A brisk wind began whipping the fog in thick and thin patches around the deck of the ship. Portholes had been closed for a few days in anticipation of bad weather. I tried to dig even deeper into my coat. My thoughts wandered to a piece of paper in my pocket. Finding a sheltered area on the wet deck, I reached carefully into my pocket to retrieve a folded map. I had spent many hours drawing the map from information collected by my father. The voyage provided ample time in our family cabin to work on the drawing. I knew we were nearing land and despite a relentless fog I held the paper in an early morning light. The captain had mentioned a few days earlier that we would soon be nearing the southern tip of Newfoundland. I looked on my piece of paper and with a few passengers looking over my shoulders I traced my finger along an Atlantic route towards a red X placed at a watery spot called Cape Race. I had memorized our approach to Canada. First we would dip beneath Newfoundland, pass Cape Race, and enter the endless expanse of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Passing between the Gaspé Peninsula and the island of Anticosti we would steam our way up the St. Lawrence River. Despite fog and wind, it was the prospect of seeing our new homeland that brought so many up on deck that morning. After ten days of crossing an empty and sometimes rude Atlantic Ocean, as well as many months of preparation for the voyage, we were ready to catch a glimpse of Canada. The captain also informed us that any first sighting would be brief. The next major sighting would not appear until later when we approached the Gaspé Peninsula. He estimated the time of our view of Cape Race would be at about 7:30 that morning. I looked at the watch I had borrowed from my father. It was nearly 7:30 and still the fog persisted with near-zero visibility.

Once again the foghorn tore through the cold and misty morning.

Suddenly, as if nature had finally heard the pathetic plea of a lonely ship on a sea of zero visibility, the fog lifted. Grey water spread endlessly before me. The horizon was a bleak line. The ship continued to roll gently over slow waves. There was no land in sight. Had we missed Cape Race? Had we missed Canada? I walked over to the other side of ship only to be greeted by the same empty watery horizon. Behind us lay the receding blanket of fog; in front just water and no land. Disappointed I returned to the group of immigrants who remained huddled by the railings. I asked a member of the ship's crew if we had passed Cape Race. He muttered something about not knowing or caring as he had passed this way before and it all looked the same to him. He warned me not to run on the wet deck.

Just as I capitulated to my disappointment and as impatience began to make its presence known, a shout from our group of immigrants broke the silence.

"Look, over there! That must be Cape Race!"

Everyone strained their eyes to catch sight of land.

I pushed my way through many wet duffel coats to get a look myself. It was, however, a disappointing glimpse. Far away along a pale horizon was a small patch of dark mass that vaguely resembled a bit of land. Was it Cape Race? As I pondered the answer to my question, the fog returned, wrapping itself around the ship as suddenly as it had disappeared. Amidst a

muffled chorus of grunts, inaudible curses, and other not-so-kind words, the passengers left the deck for their cabins and any number of comfortable lounges. The first breakfast call was only minutes away. Fortunately, there would be some consolation in mounds of pancakes, bowls of porridge, plates of eggs, juice, toast, and steaming coffee. I remained on deck a few minutes longer, not willing to accept the fact that my first sight of "the promised land" was a disappointing glimpse. There had to be more. Perhaps the captain had made a mistake. If, however, he had gotten us this far, safe and sound and on course, why would he be mistaken about Cape Race? I consulted my map once more and figured that in a short while we would be able to see the shores of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. I calculated that even if we had missed seeing Cape Race we would soon also see the shores of Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, and Quebec, as they were "just around the corner," forming a semi-circle around the Gulf of St. Lawrence. It would be my first awakening to the geography of North America. I was too young to comprehend Canada's majestic expanse using European measures. I had been accustomed to small villages "just around the corner" as I skated along canals and rivers. Therefore, I assumed Canada to appear in the same manner. Not until my first drive across Canada many years later in 1974, did I fully realize how truly awesome and big this country really was.

Just around the corner is not a matter of mere kilometres. Often it is hundreds or thousands of kilometres and days of driving, such as the distance from Toronto to Winnipeg, a distance not even one third of the country's width. But here I stood, on the deck of a wet ship. After all, I was thirteen years old and a "long way" for a young man's understanding had only been trips across the full length of the Netherlands. Trips on my father's *Goggomobile* scooter or on the trains that would take only two to three hours. I simply had no idea about Canada's endless distances. I thought we had come a long way when we had barely left our Dutch harbour, passed through a special entry waterway into the English Channel, and steamed through the Channel to the edge of the Atlantic. It took only a day to travel that short distance but it seemed like eternity to me. And an ocean yet to come. What I did not know was that at this moment lay before me Gulf of St. Lawrence, a huge body of water that spread nearly three hundred miles from north to south, a distance longer than the entire country in which I was born. And this was *just* a gulf, with the bulk of Canada still spread out for many thousands of kilometres in every other direction, north, south, east and west.

When the fog finally lifted completely, a sudden event added a much-needed bright moment to an otherwise dreary day. Although the sighting was distant, the captain announced over the ship's loudspeakers that whales could be seen off the port side of the ship. I joined the rush to port side. Many people stayed in line for the first breakfast call. They had been disappointed with the prospects of seeing Cape Race and considered it a wise choice to stay below and avoid yet another disappointment. However, as clear as I could see, in the distance were the unmistakable white plumes of breath of a small pod of whales who surfaced regularly as they made their way north. What kind of whales I did not know.

Somehow I felt vindicated. I dismissed thoughts of having missed Canada altogether and stayed on deck for many hours to watch the ship slowly dip its bow into the waves. It was a welcome change from being confined for many days to our family cabin, too seasick to care about any land or other sightings. When the noon hour passed I finally returned to our cabin. My father did his best to explain the great distances that lay ahead of us, but he promised that soon we would be able to see the Canadian coastline and the shores of Quebec along the St. Lawrence River. The best was yet to come. He was right.

When we finally reached the mouth of the St. Lawrence River, having quietly passed Anticosti Island, the view was breathtaking. June had finally dawned in brilliant sunshine and I stood fixed to the deck of the ship. Once in a while I shifted from port to starboard to catch the "other side of heaven," as the view slowly unfolded before my eyes. Even as I close my eyes many years later, I can still see the mountains and steep headlands that plunged into the sea followed by rolling hills that dripped in an abundance of early summer colours. I didn't want to miss a thing. Slowly and deliberately we made our way up the river. It was as if the captain knew there were many on deck who not only savoured the view, but who also had to deal with overwhelming emotions as ten days on a dark ocean finally gave way to a panorama of magnificent splendour. Words could not adequately describe the view. I think the captain envisioned himself as grand marshal of some giant homecoming parade. Flags appeared everywhere. On both sides of the river wound a black asphalt highway, often touching the very shore of the river. For the first time I could see people. They were driving along the highway in big cars. I wondered who they were. Could these be "*Canadians*"? Could they see our ship as it slowly pushed its way up the river? Were they waving at me? Could they see me?

I waved back.

My mind drank in every moment along the great river.

The mountains of the Gaspé Peninsula followed and formed a beautiful gateway to our new home. At one point along the river known as Father's Point, a small boat came alongside the S.S. Waterman to bring us our much needed pilot to guide us up the big river.

Thoughts turned towards the future, even if they were the thoughts of only a young man. As anyone who knows me will testify, I am prone to vivid imaginations and fantasies. Therefore my thoughts turned to school, home, and seasons of play. I would probably not go to school anymore so that I could help my father build a log house and cut trees from the forests that bordered a vast wilderness around our soon-to-be family homestead. Of course, we would have to start building right away to be ready in time for the winter's first snow. My mind drifted to a collection of photographs my father had so carefully pasted in an album. Banff, Alberta. He had been very thorough in his investigation of Canada.

"The Canadian government is glad to see us," he said, "and the Dutch government is glad to get rid of us."

I remember carrying a personal picture of the Honourable John Diefenbaker, Prime Minister of Canada, in my pocket, complete with a hearty welcome to Canada. Actually it was a standard, government-issue, postcard, but I did not care. I must have showed that card to everyone I knew in Zwolle, so impressed was I with the fact that the Prime Minister himself had personally invited me to come to Canada. Perhaps it accounted for the fact that for many years after I reached voting age, I voted *Progressive Conservative*.

Forgotten was the long grey journey across the Atlantic. Forgotten was seasickness, cabin fever, and nauseating line-ups for meals when we all stood waiting patiently along smelly passageways awash in the foul odours of fuel and lubricating oil from steamy engine rooms. Forgotten were my father's white shirts as they hung on coat hangers to dry in our cabin, slowly swaying back and forth with the rolling and pitching movements of the ship. June 1958, became forever etched in my thirteen-year old mind as that memorable day when I first steamed up the St. Lawrence River, a day bathed in my mind's eye in deep blue waters, majestic pale-blue mountains, green hills and bright sunny skies with snow-white clouds.

Every mile and moment along the river was drenched in a fulfillment of dreams I had nurtured for months. Needless to say, the dreams of my father and mother were much less

romantic. Theirs were thoughts of survival and the unknowns of a new country, the hidden perils of a new culture, and struggles of a new language. Our only tie with the old Dutch ways was a representative of the Christian Reformed Church, the Canadian version of the *Christeljk Gereformeerde Kerk* in the Netherlands, to which our family had belonged as long as I can remember. Our Canadian representative was there to help us find a new home, to recommend suitable places for employment, and of course settle us into the nearest church. Most immigrants followed the advice of this church representative. Our representative was especially excited about southern Ontario in a province whose economy was booming because of massive post-war growth especially in the building trades and manufacturing sectors. The only relative we knew was my mother's step-sister, aunt Janny and husband, uncle Izak Jager, who also lived somewhere in southern Ontario. They had immigrated years earlier. They lived in a new home and boasted continually about Ontario, the province of opportunity.

Our journey up the St. Lawrence River eventually took us to Quebec City, our first port of call. The ship slowly docked below a steep embankment that climbed to a high plateau crowned with historic fields. A couple of small wooden staircases led precariously to the top of the embankment. But these were not for the ship's passengers. The stairs led to The Plains of Abraham, site of the Conquest of 1759, when British forces defeated French forces. In 1791, just thirty-two years later, Canadian Parliament passed the Canada Act which divided French and English Canada into Upper Canada (Ontario) and Lower Canada (Quebec). We had just docked in Lower Canada. My thoughts were, however, not on Canadian history when the S.S. Waterman docked in Quebec City. My mind was filled with pictures my father had glued in his big Canada scrapbook, pictures of Mounties in scarlet tunics and seated on black stallions. There were photographs of Plains Indians in full ceremonial costume, a prairie cowboy complete with buckskin chaps and wide-brimmed hat, and grain silos framed along the horizon by those awesome and majestic Rockies. I dreamed that soon I would be there. Canada was a land of fantasy, at least for a thirteen-year old boy.

Strong gusts of wind did not stop excited immigrants from leaving the ship. They were glad to be on *terra firma* again. They stood in small clusters on the deck of the ship as they clutched cardboard suitcases. A sudden gust threw a number of passengers off balance. Some fell to the deck. A suitcase snapped open spilling its contents everywhere. The wind caught linens and fine Dutch underwear and tossed them into the river. However, nothing could dampen the spirits of immigrants. Slowly they began leaving the ship. As they walked down the gangway, they turned to wave a final goodbye and then disappeared into the immigration building. I returned to my cabin to read some more from my English/Dutch dictionary.

"How do you do."

"Very well, thank you."

"Where is the bus station?"

I practiced and practiced. It was hopeless. I could not master English using a Dutch phonetic system.

"Is this the way to the post office?"

Sleep soon overcame me. Tomorrow was a new day. Montreal not Quebec City was our destiny and final stop for our ship's trans-Atlantic journey. We arrived around lunch time. The city afforded us some time to walk around and the weather was good. We spent several hours in a beautiful park. We bought some bread at a local grocery store as well as fresh-baked buns, butter, cheese, and milk. Under a warm and bright sun we enjoyed our first picnic on Canadian soil. Local residents who walked in the park stared curiously at this fresh-off-the-boat family of

eight. Maybe we did look rather bedraggled having just gotten off the boat. Some nodded with broad grins, perhaps in memory of their own first steps on Canadian soil. A number of pigeons joined our picnic. Not all the Verstraete's had fared too well on our epic journey. Seasickness had affected most of us, some worse than others. A Montreal park was welcome relief from the ocean. By evening we boarded a train for our next destination, Toronto.

"All aboard!"

As we left Montreal's railway yards, evening turned to night. I pressed my face against the window to catch a glimpse of the Rockies. All I could see was the reflection of lightbulbs of the train's interior outlining many silhouettes of tired immigrants and other passengers. Despite vigorous promotion of trans-continental trains and the fabled Canadian silver-bullet, we were destined instead for a slow and rocking ride on a train which had no doubt seen better days. The train was drafty and messy, with dirty washrooms and hard seats. All I remember of the Montreal-Toronto train ride was pitch-black darkness, except for a brief moment when I caught some movement in the trees that lined the tracks. It was a white-tailed deer, my first sight of Canadian wildlife. Sometime during the long night we arrived at Toronto's Union Station.

Waiting on a nearby platform was the Chicago-Toronto *Dayliner*, a sleek and silvery train that would make a stop in Chatham, a city in south western Ontario. The ride would take about three hours. However, this ride was smooth, but too smooth for Lida, one of my sisters. She was simply overwhelmed by too many hours of travel and became very sick. It was a messy night on the Chicago-Toronto *Dayliner*. At last, the train rolled to a quiet halt in Chatham.

The night was strange and dark. Bright headlights suddenly caught us in their beams as we stood on the platform. Soon we were shaking hands with two friendly drivers. We were ushered into two large cars that resembled a majestic livingroom on wheels. I remember the dark and warm interior of a 1945 Chevrolet. The others traveled in an older Pontiac. We drove through the night and rolled quietly towards the end of our long journey. Some of the children slept. Both cars finally pulled into a wide driveway somewhere on the outskirts of a mid-size, Ontario town named Wallaceburg. The night was still very dark. We were tucked between flannel sheets and minutes later we were sound asleep. I woke early in the morning, eager to get a look at my new country. My first view of snow-capped mountains, maybe a waterfall or Mounties on horses. How naïve I was. I stood on the bed and looked out a small window.

The land was flat with not a hill in sight.

This was Wallaceburg.