

# My Canada

*The author and film maker Jacques Godbout was born in Montreal in 1933. His many works include the novels Les Têtes à Papineau and Le Couteau sur la Table, and such documentary films as Le Mouton Noir and the recently released Traître ou Patriote. Godbout has won a number of national and international awards for his work and is a member of the Order of Quebec*



Nineteen forty-six was a turning point all over the world. Peace returned to Europe and Asia, the full extent of the Nazi horror was brought to light, the Cold War broke out between the Soviet Union and the United States, and the threat of a nuclear holocaust hung over us all. Every day seemed to have its share of dramatic events,

and everywhere new ideas were being debated on the radio and in newspapers. My father subscribed to *Le Canada*, a liberal daily that has unfortunately long since gone under, and it was here, at age 12, that I discovered a fascinating universe.

I went to school at Jean-de-Brébeuf college in the Montreal district of Côte-des-Neiges and was just beginning my classical education: the Jesuit fathers acquainted us with Latin and taught us the history of ancient Rome. At that age, everything seemed possible. I could have become a hockey player; like my idol, Maurice “Rocket” Richard, I played left wing and was a fairly prolific scorer. I could have become a champion skier; the snow-covered Laurentians provided six months of good schussing a year. But I was already a bit of a dreamer and very lazy, and generally preferred to immerse myself in an adventure novel or idle away an afternoon at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Art was a passion of mine, and I spent my Sundays at the museum discovering Montreal artists such as Arthur Lismer, Stanley Cosgrove and Alfred Pellan, comparing their work to the paintings of European masters that had been donated by the rich Westmount merchants who were the institution’s patrons.

TIM ZELTNER

I had managed to obtain some English-made tubes of oil paints and canvases of various sizes from New York and devoted many hours to sketching imaginary portraits and cityscapes. I was sure that I would become a painter of international repute.

Whenever I botched a picture (a rather frequent occurrence, I’m afraid), I would wander up Mount Royal in the heart of the city to quell my frustration. There, I could find a forest, a lake and, most interesting of all to me, Catholic, Protestant and Jewish cemeteries. Here there were as many stories as there were tombstones – stories of boys and girls cut down before their time, of wives mourning their husbands, of children honouring the memory of their parents. Sculptures and slabs of polished granite that marked the small territories of death further fuelled my young imagination. I could envision an underground city more vibrant still than its above-ground counterpart, where, on Saturday afternoons, shoppers stormed Eaton’s and Morgan’s, those wondrous temples of wealth whose ground-floor cosmetics counters filled the air with heady scents.

Now that the war was over and the German mass murderers were about to go on trial, now that we had experienced forced industrialization and young women had left their kitchens to work in factories and offices, nothing would ever be the same. I realized then that I was living in a modern country and began to look to the future and wonder what I would do in this new world.

Whenever my teachers asked me what I wanted to be, I’d reply, “Maybe try journalism.” My parents had neither a chauffeur-driven automobile nor racehorses at Blue Bonnets racetrack. As a child of the middle class, I felt my only claim to fame was my

Art was a passion of mine, and I spent my  
Sundays at the museum discovering Montreal artists such as Arthur Lismer,  
Stanley Cosgrove and Alfred Pellan



DOMINIQUE MALATERRE

writing, which was attracting some attention in student publications. I would earn my living with my paintbrush and my pen, I told myself.

That year was a turning point not just in the life of the world but in my own life. My father, an entomologist specializing in insect-induced plant diseases, looked after the health of market gardens in and around the Montreal plain. He was a rigorous and anxious man, a true scientist. At that time, the suburbs had not yet gobbled up the rich black soil of the vast gardens of the area, which supplied Montreal's open-air markets and were the focus of my father's work. His work also took him to farms and orchards in the Eastern Townships, and when he returned home after a road trip visiting these holdings, the family would gather in the living room to hear him recount his experiences. He would tell us how much he had enjoyed walking through fields of oats, identifying wild mushrooms, meeting the descendants of United Empire Loyalists, who raised steers and dairy cows, grew McIntosh apples on rocky slopes, mended their fences with great care and tastefully maintained their ancient brick or stone homes, which were generally ringed with cedar or poplar.

My father's obvious pleasure in talking about the trees he saw – in describing a solitary elm standing at the end of a field or the many hues of maples in the fall – should have made me passionate about the landscape and turned me into a poet of the countryside. But I remained steadfastly indifferent to the bucolic charms that so enthralled my father. In truth, I was only interested in urban landscapes, overflowing with asphalt and concrete and strewn with dandelions and telephone poles. I was enamoured of streetcars and crowds, traffic at busy intersections, games in laneways, noisy factory areas, steam-locomotive maintenance sheds and shiny rails, which seemed a thousand times more poetic than the empty and cold landscapes of the Group of Seven. I was looking not for horizons, but, rather, for the seasonal delights of the city, from January blizzards to soft April showers to stunning July thunderstorms. I took pleasure in watching the rain

turn our streets into dark mirrors. When the snow became so thick that we were forced to dig improbable tunnels to get out of the house, or when snowblowers hummed away until late into the night, I felt profoundly happy.

And so, when my father suggested that he and I should spend a month together in the summer, combining business and pleasure in a tour of Quebec, I wondered if he had a motive beyond simply spending some time alone with his eldest son. Was he hoping to convert me to rustic landscapes? I often wonder if he had any conception of what he might be starting.

I was more than a little proud to place my suitcase beside his in the trunk of the Ministry of Agriculture's gleaming blue Dodge and, dare I admit, shed no tears on leaving my mother, sister and brother to become Father's road companion for the month. I was bursting with pride, as if, suddenly, I had become an adult and a friend to my father, not simply his son.

Back then, a car could theoretically reach speeds of up to 160 kilometres an hour. But most of Quebec's roads were barely wide enough for two vehicles to pass each other, so driving at speeds of 65 kilometres an hour was already going hell for leather. As we left the city, heading east, I felt that my father was burning rubber.

First stop: a visit to the tobacco farms of my uncles near the Richelieu and l'Assomption rivers. Back in the Dirty Thirties, well before the link between tobacco and cancer was recognized, my father had persuaded his brothers to start growing Virginia tobacco. Roméo, Rolland and Paul had bought land on either side of the St. Lawrence, along with Father, who ran his business through a tenant farmer. A civil servant's salary was modest; tobacco profits would pay for our education. We could only rejoice in all that smoke. When we arrived at the farm of my father's eldest brother, Roméo, a motion picture crew was filming a documentary on his work. I came upon the film some

60 years later in the vaults of the National Film Board and found it fascinating. But on that day long ago, I was indifferent to the cameras, the tractors, the warmth of the hothouses, the rye being rotated to fertilize the land – even the idea of a fishing expedition with my cousins to the nearby river left me unmoved. My attention was completely absorbed by the two dozen young

But I remained steadfastly indifferent to the bucolic charms that so enthralled my father. In truth, I was only interested in urban landscapes



I had travelled far that summer, not just in terms of distance but in my personal journey. I like to think that my father was pleased with my coming of age and the part he'd played in it

women who were nimbly tying ripe tobacco leaves to wooden laths and hanging them up to dry.

Buxom and lively, they wore short-sleeved cotton dresses, entrancing me with their smiles. For hours I watched them from afar, a city boy experiencing his very first testosterone rush. I would have liked to have joined them, to touch their arms, to feel their warmth, but my father had undertaken a scientific journey, and Eros was not on the itinerary.

The following day, crossing the St. Lawrence River by way of the Sorel Islands, I learned that Indian hemp (otherwise known as marijuana) grew wild in the area, and every year the Mounties would spray it with a defoliant from small planes. "And the following year," my father told me, "the marijuana comes back more hardy than ever!" Unable to contain his laughter, my father explained to me that many local farmers' wives grew the plant. They had no intention of harvesting it, but simply liked the way it looked. Other times, other customs.

Driving along the highways, we passed combines and hay wagons, and, once in a while, I'd catch a glimpse of the mighty St. Lawrence, which my map told me was rolling northwards from where we were, even though my father insisted that we were going "down" to Quebec City.

Having only known Montreal, spread out like a vast blanket all around its mountain, I was taken aback when I first saw Quebec City, which appeared suddenly, rising from the river like a jewel, so beautiful and so old, with its elegant architecture set on a bright promontory. I was given the inevitable lesson in Canadian history as my father led me through the old capital's narrow streets, from monument to monument, humming folk songs as he went along. From the walls of the Citadel, I saw the Plains of Abraham, where one lost battle led to the French king's ceding New France to England.

We stayed at the Château Frontenac and were received in the salons of the upper town, where the defeat of Premier Adélarde Godbout, my great-uncle, at the hands of Maurice Duplessis was still being discussed by uncles and aunts sipping gin from small glasses.

Standing before the assembly building, I was lectured on the Union Nationale's fraud-ridden electoral practices, my first lesson in democracy. From the terrace of the Château Frontenac, overlooking the river, we could see the historic Ile d'Orléans, cradle of New France – and of the Godbout family, for that is where our ancestor, a *chaloupier* [longboat builder]

from Normandy, settled in 1642.

Summer was turning into a thrilling adventure. I was travelling through time and space, regretfully leaving behind cousins (both male and female) at every stop. Along the south shore of the St. Lawrence, from Quebec City to Rimouski, my father introduced me to a parish priest, a mayor and, in Trois-Pistoles, a notary who was an expert in genealogy. We would check into a hotel one night and be put up the following night by a farmer my father knew in, say, Saint-Eloi, a village near Rivière du Loup where my father had spent a memorable vacation when he was my age. I also met relatives who produced peat moss from a million-year-old bog for use as a fertilizer.

At each stop, I discovered something new. At each relative's house, we were fussed over by aunts who offered maple sugar pies so delicious that my father's scientific journey was becoming a gastronomic pilgrimage.

We returned to Montreal via the north shore, crossing the St. Lawrence by ferry at a point where the river seemed as vast as a sea. Carved by bays and fjords, the landscape of the north shore, harsher and rockier than that of the south shore, is known to many through the works of the remarkable artists of Charlevoix.

Exhausted but happy, I sat by my father as we drove the last leg of our journey, recalling all these people who had greeted me warmly in their homes and my father's introducing me to his relatives as *mon homme*, a sign of manhood, which had touched me deeply.

We reached Montreal on a Saturday, in the dead of night, the sparkling city lights illuminating the sky.

I can still recall the moment when we parked the dusty Dodge in the grey shed behind the house, marking the end of our journey. I had travelled far that summer, not just in terms of distance but in my personal journey. I like to think that my father was pleased with my coming of age and the part he'd played in it. He had given me a deeper understanding of my people, not just my relatives but the proud French Canadians who spoke my mother tongue. This trip had given me a direction; I would be a writer, my books filled with stories of my people, the *gens du pays*.

I have been exploring the world ever since that trip, although I unfailingly come back to my home port on the shores of the St. Lawrence. □

