

Notre Dame du Nord to Sherbrooke (1972) · *Frederic Will*

THE SNOBBISH PLEASURE of joining another country's place-names. Notre Dame du Nord and Sherbrooke. (As if we read *Nogales to Niagara Falls*? The throwing together of names assaulting the land itself, redesigning the land.) And all because of the accident of what is met, in the course of travel. Or is *event* a better word than accident here? Accident converted into that which accident means.

Was Notre Dame du Nord different because we thought it was? Or really different? From Field, through Martens River, and on up the highway north from North Bay, Ontario kept its promise of dullness: feldspar, excellent roads, eternal road signs, fallen tales of the English migration. Then we crossed, in the late afternoon, into fields which were lapping the sun into green, which were dotted with farmhouses—not just with villages—and which brought the simple country church into simple unity with the land. The new world was shabby and almost beautiful.

The way people had stacked up wood in this land, Québec, said a lot. Around Notre Dame du Nord the woodpiles were neat and tight. (There were no such things in Ontario; almost enough rationale for a border.) In the afternoon sun the piles glowed, tawny and potent, stacked up like wise provision. The long green fields reflected the same charm of wholeness. In *this* world the churchspires should and could climb.

All the way up to Rouyn we kept to this peaceful formula. The houses grew farther apart; the traffic thinned out; but even the meanest farmhouse was surrounded by lawn and, in that sharp, curried greenness, by a trimmed border of flowers. In the slanting sunlight, borders of long-stemmed flowers laid spindly, immaculate shadows.

Rouyn seemed a leap, from all that, into familiarity; a leap out from the rural, threatened, and here deeply Catholic matrix, that still ties French-Canada to the French countryside.

In Rouyn there was “life,” though in Rouyn there was little life. There was movement borrowed from money, the pursuit of money, and the naked process of growing up. There were plenty of cars, plenty of teddy boys and teddy girls, and not a single book store. There were lots of cinemas with odious films—*Daughter of Frankenstein*, *Woman in Slavery*, *Skyjacked*—the scum of the North American industry. There was a main street humming with traffic and talkative clutches of workers. There was life, and there was not much life.

At first, I think we had been slightly anxious, sensing hostility toward us. In the Albert Hotel, downtown, we had expected vestiges of Victoriana. These

did not extend beyond the lobby, and the desk clerk; blue coat, gold buttons. In the café restaurant to the rear the clientele was teen-age. The waitresses, slightly older, tougher and brassy, met us with scorn. Impatient looks as we studied the menu. Petulant stampings of mademoiselle toes. "No seconds on butter." "No seconds on coffee." Too busy to add up the bill, to accept your money. You'll just have to wait. Were we hated Anglos? In the Motel, in other shops, the same unloving impression. A Capital, it seems, of the folly of Québec separatism.

Yet there was an innocence to Rouyn. It was the innocence of small-town downtown crowds; teddy boys and girls, in the style of the U.S. fifties: loungers on the doorsteps of hotels, of restaurants. Nothing aggressive; massive lounging. (Later we saw this style in force, in the long sunlit evenings of Chibougamau, in front of the cinema, in front of hotels. The mating game—boys lounging over against girls, in sunspoken strictness; the lounging game, the game of putting in time in the Middle North.) The innocence of a downtown midsummer village, in central Nebraska.

At many points Rouyn-Noranda puts down what guard it has, against the rare and curious visitor. The sidestreets, of this mining and prospecting town, are quiet and simple. In summer old men dream on their porches, and smoke; hand lawn mowers push swathes of grass. The stoops of the houses are high off the ground, to clear the snow. Flowers are tucked, for the tender season of growth, into dark black mulch close to the foundations.

This same kind of innocence flows from the mini-putt. (Marks this national game, this miniature *jeu d'esprit* loved by the provincial Québec town.) In Rouyn the mini is large, brightly lighted till ten at night, open at eight a.m. Crowds play. On the smooth felt fairways the colored golf balls flirt with their cups. Teen-agers cluster in well-fixed peer groups. Even the city fathers take part. Business suits, ties, polished shoes; the camaraderie of the power structure; laughing their secure way through the neon night. The mini-putt is the agora of Rouyn.

As you leave the city the aura of innocence falls away. The fallacy wrapped in that aura comes off on your hands. The smokestacks remember the fume and ore that selected this spot in the world. You remember "the rapid expansion from raw bush in 1925." (By mid-century "capital expenditure of more than \$12,000,000 . . . on smelter and concentration equipment. . .") Body struggle with nature created this place.

At last sight a gentle rain was sifting onto Rouyn, an emulsion of smoke and chemical poisons. But soon—a reward in this counterpointing North—we were in open country; a highway, shaggy pines, a vehicle every twenty minutes. Birds of prey assaulting invisible game. We alone.

The first sight we had of Val d'Or was the graveyard, west edge of town.

This town runs simply and blankly out—into open land. (As does even Montreal, falling away into what-it-is-not, like a metaphysical precipice.) The municipal graveyard is the dividing line.

This graveyard is a yard of graves: no planting to speak of; no real division between yard and town: a naked and dusty trough full of old Val d'Or.

Next the used car lots, the city's second line of defense; and they in turn to the long Main Street, and it to the Cathedral, caught in a bend that seems the end of the road, and so over and over possesses the eye.

The public buildings and private nooks were snowless, sunny, and bald; though their form was intact.

The charm, of this charmless mid-North, was only too clear in Val d'Or. It was there in the familiar Hotel Sigma—the old beast undergoing repairs, peeled back to show the tarpaper skin—and it was there in Woolworth's; it was there in the liquor store; it was there in the greetings on the street. It was there as one neared, in stages, that north where psychiatrists and the need for them are unknown.

Val d'Or goes out like a lion to the east; in any weather. There stand the clutches of half-transplanted suburbia; the whiff of the city. There starts the slow climb up the map, north.

Senneterre comes through, with the map's clear promise; takes you higher and farther up the paper.

The Café Manoir? We made it our center, for the life of that day seemed centered there. The little town ran into brush on every side; but the Café Manoir gave man a buzzing of life that was wholly his own; a way of forgetting what lay, semi-conscious and unhistorical, beyond the tracks: the pine forest, scrubby close in, then dense; and the cosmos of animal lives that needed none of us.

Beside us on the counter stools were Indian children; teen-agers flirting, three grade school girls, a four year old. Not a feature out of place. They talked patois—their own plus a kind of a kind of French—and belonged completely inside their language, not to mention their world.

The older children went out before us. They left the Manoir with its Cokes, *patates frites*, its neon juke-box, and rounded the corner. Their fathers, out there in conversation, were leaning against a storefront; three of them, drunk. Their kids went up. The circle was completed. Parents went off down the streets, followed by the aimless new generation, into the nearest bar.

As you drive north from Senneterre you start to see nature as something there; sharp, distinct, and autonomous. The forests close in. The road signs offer sketchy outlines of moose and caribou; a fox appears on the roadside with steamy green eyes; a flock of vultures flies confidential and low.

What is missing? There are no more easy supports to the eye; no ads, few

roadsigns, no places to stop—except everywhere—no places to eat, no cars to notice, no gas to buy. Only road, more road; now straight, now carving an unexpected angle into the forest. And every once in a while, every twenty minutes, a truck from the other direction, north, and after it, hanging for minutes in its wake, a deep sifting of light brown dust.

Chibougamau lies at the end of this road. En route you have prepared with little: a couple of migratory Indian settlements—teepees, dogs, waving and grins—and a couple of gringo hunting camps, set back silent and violent away from the road; and then Chapais, a townlet with a modern *Hotel de Ville*, a central Woolworth's, a mixture of Indians, miners, and geologists. Chibougamau will lie somewhere near. It surprises by being in no way surprising.

You are likely to take the first observation post; Motel Alouette, south end of town. Close to the forest. From your little balcony you look onto a settlement of mobile homes. Near them, closer in to you, is a shed beside a mini air-strip, and two helicopters, waiting. (Helicopters are always waiting.) The summer is hot; and light, bright, and sunny til after eleven.

Later, near sunset, you walk to the hill which leads to the center of town. You pass the bakery, the big garage, and the dairy freeze. Dwellings, business; business, dwellings.

Chibougamau works through the night. Trucks bring in the supporting goods. They rumble over the dust from the east, from St. Félicien; then rumble back, taking paper and pulp and mining equipment. (Gravy for the "transport companies," whose monopolies strangle the economic structure of mid-North life.) There is neither incentive nor time to laze in this restless town.

You think of the place by "monuments," though none there are. Brochures praise the town's "most daring churches." The chief, St. Michel, is in the center of town; clearing the air like a dove, turning its carving profile sweep in every direction, announcing its good news to car lots, mobile homes, Main Street, and the *Hotel de Ville*.

Inside, the Church is light, ready to take flight. The longer vertical arch climbs up from the nave in a swoop of glass stitched only by bars of transverse lead. The daring is repeated by skylights in the apse, generous holes full of northern light. Snow concentrates that light to crystal.

St. Michel—only recently completed—already shows the bite of winter. On the lower blade of the eaves, where they swoop groundward, the tiles are starting to erode. The side of the wall is weathered. Even the postcards "reveal these facts," tell the northern story. Nature is the aggressor, met in the center of town by double or triple-glazed windows, high-raised porches, thick aluminum sidings.

The points of provision are basic points, *La Baie d'Hudson*, Woolworth's, the inevitable Chinese Restaurant, and the official buildings; there for their purposes, reasonable and stripped of symbolism.

La Baie d'Hudson, and the variety store across the street, are the center of town, face each other from either side of the long main street. In Chibougamau these shops are more strictly functional than farther south. The farther north you go, the more the hardware encroaches onto the soft—the dresses, the jackets. The plaster mannikins grimace a little more starkly. The consumers shop a little less with their senses, a little more with their senses of purpose. Yet the consumer game is here as elsewhere played by the current ground rules: advertising and rhetoric, mass production and distribution. We had to go to Woolworth's, in Chibougamau, to find alarm clocks made in Mainland China.

In the corner of the *Baie d'Hudson* is a coffee bar and snack shop; and on those stools, over boiling brew, the news of the town goes round. (As it does in the Miner's Tavern, at the far north end of the street, where news of the latest finds, and latest bankruptcies, floats in clear jeer.)

We planted ourselves in that tight little eatery; outsiders crashing the clan at its work. At noon the girls would be lined up on stools at the counter. Were they eating or drinking? A Pepsi here, a candy bar there. Talking together. Smoking cigs. Holding the fort. The fort twixt the legs, one gathered, was equally guarded; as over it currents of language were flowing. The boys heard no word; and would hear none, far away at the other side of the room. Pinball machines were all they knew; young high school guys whose talk was football, whose action an eye on the neon box. They were testing their strength, jukebox nobility of the desperate north.

At night the same guys would sit in the endless sunlight, on some available curb or stoop; in front of the cinema, in front of the *Hotel de Ville*. Across from them, bent in together, their girls would counter them, covered with language.

Away from the main street innocence and strength made much of themselves; kept one another alive.

Five streets in depth made up the town. Main Street and then, on either side, the residential. Here was the new and fragile. Five years ago there was little building; but by now it is loud, blisters the summer air. Hot pants and blue jeans and bellowing toddlers and squeaky prams, as in any suburb. Yet the suburb was thin. The forest was close, the winter total, the porches high, the aluminum sidings triple thick. And twelve feet down the soil was completely frozen.

Innocence? Theology has pulled out the thorn and contents itself with encouraging omens. It has let man back into the garden. Sociology and "ecology" have taken up the chant, *man the spoiler, man the fouler*; but without perspective, without a vision. The struggle with nature must not be mentioned. But man at the radical point of loss is as real as ever.

Your speech with yourself, in Chibougamau, will touch the issue. Walk a while in the forest, if walk you can. Even to move there is a struggle. The

trees, close set and sentinel strict, appear from the road to be clear cut rows. They are not. The ground in these forests is spongy—mossy, wet, and uneven. It is cluttered with fallen branches, patches of lichens, little ponds, tough arbutus or blueberry clumps. Movement is difficult. Nature the guarded, nature the fort.

Conquering nature is here the business of mines. The town is an assault on the earth; on the copper, gold, and potassium that form the marrow of this land. The road to the north of town takes a fork, a half-mile out from Chibougamau. To the west goes the long gravel stretch—140 miles—to James Bay, the lower corner of Hudson Bay. To the east, the road snakes in and out around Lakes Chibougamau and Gilman, up and down and around past the mines themselves, the derricks and shafts, the whole expanse of lovely, ugly aggression.

One mind of these operations is back in town; in *Terres et Forêts*, or in *Richesses Minérales*. Either of these offices, of the provincial government, will establish its tone right before your eyes. *Richesses Minérales*. Did X mine there? Has Y Concern closed out yet at a certain lake? Have you issued a permit for explorations in Z? Have you a map for quadrangle x or y or z? And to each of these questions a bilingual provincial civil servant replies by bustling: pulls out small scale maps of desolation, checks old dossiers and mining records, brushes through a geology handbook. Geology is the beginning and end in this room. Its perspective is egalitarian; land for the sake of land—no matter how obscure or distant—provided it has a heart of gold.

Through endless Chibougamau Parc you drive out the hard dusty road toward Lac St. Jean, Roberval, St. Félicien. In the park deer and rabbits and foxes show, and are not afraid. Yet a couple of hours into the park, you are reminded again of man the aggressor. The highway is coming. What begins as a globbing of dust turns into bulldozers, Mack trucks, power.

By the time you reach Lac St. Jean, hours between yourself and the park, you have left the dialectic of man and nature; have passed once more to nature “societalized,” nature cut back to what mind will let nature be.

And so on down through the towns turned over, by summer and holidays, to the temporary laws of men: the icy lake of Pointe Bleue supporting those beefy professional swimmers, who buoy up the world-wide fame of Roberval; the knee-deep snowy austerity of Val Jalbert, now melted away into a squall of tourists. Nature, which was prominent, forceful, and causative, here fallen victim—not to the tough-nosed Mack but to the soft-skinned Canadian buck.

The hardlands this time are gentle and still, yet barren and empty of people. The road leads two hundred miles south through La Mauricie, on the St. Maurice River. Why did nobody build here? Why does nothing but logging move on this river? Why are there almost no towns—except La Tuque—

between Chambord in the north and Shawinigan in southern Québec, in the ambit of Montreal?

The province is huge, and fills up first where money calls loudest. La Mauricie is tree-rich, not mineral rich; not first for development. And the whole stretch down from Chambord is long and rough. Its watery backbone, Rivière St. Maurice, is its lifeline too, drawing what civilization there is to the river's edge. There is something forbidding about this stretch. The "middle-North" of Québec is less forbidding—from Chibougamau to Manicouagan to Schefferville—because more explicitly requiring "adjustment." La Mauricie is just tough and long, endless forests, winding hills, stiff grades. La Tuque, a village playing at town, is the lonely residue of this discovery.

Yet the traveller is never alone, as he drills this line through the province's center. He is always beside the river, and beside the river's cargo. From Lac Bouchette to Grandmère the cargo is rolling. At times the water is totally hidden by logs. They form its second skin, flow on its back. At times the logs stress a single swathe, a dark line of muscle down one or the other side of the river. These chunks of the north go silent beside you, to market. They flow with nature, the river, to what man has planned.

In Grandmère the millions of logs are caught, and built into mountains by the side of the river. Against the dreary horizons, one logging town after another, the arriving logs are sucked into funnels, stripped of their bark, and spat back like babies onto piles. For uses, one of which is the paper with which we write of the tall trees' use.

From Grandmère south you enter the familiar; the conurbations that are always the same; that in this case happen, but only happen, to lie between Québec City and Montreal.

By now the curve of the trip is over. What gets seen, between Grandmère and the border—in Sherbrooke, in Trois Rivières—belongs to another account, to the province's urban south.

Or rather, most of it belongs to that other account. The exception forces. Certain lonely country roads—between Trois Rivières and Sherbrooke—are frozen in a lovely paralysis; nineteenth century Catholic piety. The peace of Kingsey and Trenholm, and on round Richmond, is history. What can it feel like from far inside? There are shrines in abundance. The fences around the parks are marked by the stations of the cross. The Church bells do the telling of time. And not far off, behind this human setting, yellow green fields celebrate the mass of the seeds. The world is one, the whole it can never be.