

TRAVELS NOW AND THEN

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MONTREUX 1957

The Chateau de Chillon is a picture-book castle on the shores of Lake Geneva just east of Montreux, Switzerland. It is marvellously well preserved and today most of what you can now climb on, in and around is a restoration of structure dating from the 13th to 15th centuries. In its later forms, it guarded the approach to the route over St. Bernard's pass into Italy. But, the site was, in fact, occupied during the Bronze Age and later fortified by the Romans. In a strange way it also represents several milestones in my own life, two moments almost forty years apart. And it played a dimly perceived role in my life during the half-century in between.

The historical name most closely identified with the Chateau de Chillon is that of a 14th century Prior of St. Victor's in Geneva, named Bonivard. It seems that Bonivard spent four years chained to a particular pillar in the dungeons of the Chateaux de Chillon because he favored political independence for Geneva. This demise would hardly rank as unusual or even memorable; but it received substantial promotion in 19th century when Bonivard's travails were immortalized by the poet Byron who inscribed his name on the offending pillar where it can still be seen to this day. And so the castle is famous for the nightmarish incarceration of Bonivard and for his eventual release by the Bernese army.

In July of 1957, I was fifteen and a half years old, a gangly, shy and bespectacled boy, uncertain about what lay ahead but with considerable hidden confidence in my own intellectual ability. Girls had recently emerged into my consciousness accompanied by all the usual panolpy of sexual imaginings. But it would be many years before I would lose my virginity and that is not what this story is about. Rather this story is about the origins of nightmares, about innocent beginnings, about personal struggles and about unpretentious ends. These are some of the multiple strands connecting two moments almost forty years apart.

I begin with the little I can recall of my first visit to the Chateaux de Chillon in that summer of 1957. It was the end of one of my middle years at the country high school in Northern Ireland that played such a formative role in my life. The Rainey Endowed School, a grammar school in the semantics of the British educational system of the time, was the pride of Magherafelt, the Northern Irish village in which I grew up. It was a time when the economy of Europe was starting to emerge from the shadows of the second World War. Already, national leaders were beginning to espouse grand visions for the future for a united Europe, albeit only the western half. And so, in step with this awakening, the educational horizons of "The Rainey" were broadening. The teachers were starting to consider foreign trips and the value they would have in our education. Thus it was that the school decided to arrange the first summer trip to a foreign land. The chosen venue was Montreux, Switzerland, on the shores of Lake Geneva.

We set out for Montreux on July 3, 1957, three teachers and about 30 students. Of the students, I recall Peter Burton, Derrick Crothers, Ivan Martin, Frank Johnston, Alistair Simpson, David Gillespie, Henry Graham, Iain McKay, James Forsyth, Elizabeth Evans, Anne Farley, Elizabeth Logan and Jennifer Egan, principally because they appear in some old photographs still in my possession. There was also a group of younger students. Today the journey would take just a few hours. However, in the 1950s, it was a major expedition taking several days. According to an account of the trip written for the school magazine by a fellow student, Elizabeth Logan, we travelled by car to Belfast where we boarded the overnight boat to Liverpool. I do remember sharing a tiny cabin deep in the bowels of the boat with a classmate, Derrick Crothers. And I remember the excitement generated by the thought that several of our female classmates were bedding down in an adjoining cabin. Not, of course, that anything remotely naughty could have happened for we were meticulously chaperoned by the three quite attentive teachers who accompanied us. The senior member of this trio was Dr. McFadden, a quite formidable, chain-smoking language teacher who was also vice-principal of the school. With something of a hunched posture, he had a well-deserved reputation for meanness. One of his favorite punishments was to rap the knuckles on the back of a student's hand with a wooden ruler. And this painful infliction was not just reserved for those who were guilty of misbehaviour; it was often also used on those who committed innocent academic errors such as mispronouncing a French verb. I avoided Dr. McFadden as much as I could and cannot recall any interaction with him during the trip. The second member of the trio was Miss Rachel Carson, the vice-principal for girls and, I think, an English teacher. A small, stern woman who usually dressed in black, I remember her as remote and unfriendly. Indeed, the only one of the three whom I remember as human was Mr. George Wareham, also a language teacher. He had a fine sense of humour and used it to good effect in the classroom. Though we laughed at his jokes we also recognized that he was a very private man who lived alone and rarely socialized in the village community. It was only much later that I began to suspect that he may have been gay and that his isolation was necessary because the community would have had little tolerance for such sexual preference. They were certainly not the three teachers we would have selected as chaperones for there were many others with a much more enlightened view of education and with greater empathy for young people. Indeed, I recall that I had considerable reservations about the trip because of the perceived lack of sympathy among the leaders. However, today I have no negative recollections of their supervision. Other memories, active and suppressed, dominate my thoughts.

Arriving in Liverpool the next morning, we caught the bus to the train station where we boarded the express bound for London. It is my vague recollections that this was a long train ride lasting, perhaps, four or five hours. Apparently we spent two days in London where we stayed at a place called Asburton House of which I have no recollection. After some sightseeing which included a boat ride on the Thames and a visit to Kew Gardens, we then travelled by train to Folkestone and by boat to Calais, where we caught an overnight train to Basle in Switzerland. We changed trains there for the last leg to Montreux, where we were met by the owner of the pension at which we were going to stay, the Hotel Bouffet de la Gare. I believe the train station referred to was not the Montreux station but a smaller stop just to the west called Clarens. The hotel was a modest and basic establishment next to the railway tracks. I have some memory of wooden floorboards and airy rooms crammed with metal-framed beds. We ate in a refectory equipped with tables and benches. It was clean and adequate to our needs of the time.

From this base we ventured forth on a number of excursions during the week or so of our stay. Among these were a boat trip to Geneva, a bus ride up to the top of St. Bernard's pass on the Italian border and several trips by funicular and cable car into the mountains behind Montreux. But the excursion I would remember with most interest (though still dimly) took us a short distance along the lake shore to the Chateaux de Chillon. Strangely, Elizabeth Logan's account makes no mention of this excursion. But I do not fear an overactive imagination, for the castle features significantly in my photographs of the trip. In the years which followed I would remember the Chateaux as an interesting old castle on the lake where "Byron was imprisoned". The rest of the details must have faded rapidly. At the time I was much too interested in my female classmates and their novel attraction to pay much attention to old buildings.



Chateau de Chillon in 1957



View from the hostel window



Montreux Plage



Left: Frank Johnston on the steps of the hostel.



Right: Peter Burton, Derrick Crothers, Henry Graham, Alistair Simpson, James Forsyth and Iain McKay on the boat trip.



Left: Elizabeth Evans and Anne Farley. Right: Anne Farley and Jennifer Egan.



But there was one other vivid memory which I retained from my first visit to Montreux. This was of a conversation which I overheard between several of my classmates including Derrick Crothers, Peter Burton and David Gillespie. They were discussing alcohol consumption and the phenomena of alcoholism, a subject I realized even at the time that they knew little or nothing about. I was somewhere on the distant periphery of this conversation when it naturally turned to speculation on which of their absent classmates was most likely to become an alcoholic. David, unaware of my presence within earshot, offered the opinion that I seemed to him the most likely classmate to succumb to this disease. To this day, I am quite puzzled by my overreaction to this offhand comment for I was shaken to the core. It was not that I had any great affection for David or any great regard for his opinions. But it seemed so grossly unjust based as it was on no evidence. It was also so diametrically at odds with my own view of myself. And yet I was deeply seared by that judgment and, to this day, have not forgotten the pain it caused.



Chateau de Chillon



Tower of Chateau de Chillon

Almost forty years later, in November of 1996, I was invited to visit and lecture at the Ecole Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne (EPFL), one of the two technical universities in Switzerland. It was a most pleasant visit, in part because of the opportunity to renew professorial acquaintances at the university and in part because of the excellent hospitality extended to me by my hosts. My lecture was well received and I enjoyed participating as an external examiner for a PhD candidate examination. In addition, my principal host, Phillipe Dupont, went out of his way to show me some of the attractions of the region. Thus we took the cog railway from Montreux to a spectacular mountaintop restaurant. And, one afternoon we drove out to the Chateaux de Chillon.

Even before we passed through the gates into the castle, I sensed that the visit was going to be an unusual experience for me. Just the process of looking at the profile of the castle in its spectacular lake-side setting, was triggering long forgotten shadows in my memory of that first visit forty years before. Indeed, before I passed through the fortified castle gate I could already visualise at least the general proportions of the first courtyard. And from there the self-guided tour proceeded into the dungeon where Bonivard had been imprisoned and the stone pillar inscribed by Byron. Again, I remembered seeing these before but only because of the visual prompting I was now experiencing. And so it went throughout the tour of this marvellous and intriguing place. But the final surprise was more surreal. Near the end of the tour the visitor is led across the third courtyard to the tallest structure within the castle, a brooding square tower which served as both the treasury and the keep. First built in the 11th century and extended in the 14th, it was a very ancient tower of refuge with few doors or windows except for the narrow lookouts on the top floor. A steep wooden stairway (modern of course) on the outside led to the small entrance high above the floor of the courtyard. As I climbed these steps my sense of foreboding rose alarmingly but for no logical reason that I could perceive. Then I stooped to step through the entrance and found myself in the dimness of the cavernous interior of the keep. And suddenly I understood. The interior was empty except for a precarious wooden stairway hanging from the interior wall and winding around the corners as it rose toward a hole in the wooden floor high overhead. It was a scene immediately and frighteningly familiar to me for it had featured often in one of the few recurring nightmares that had occupied my life. In those dreams, it was always necessary for me to negotiate these tenuous stairs which were invariably on the verge of collapse. Yet, if during the intervening years, you had asked me where the structure was located I would have had no idea. It was a very strange feeling to learn, seemingly for the first time, the site of those nightmares. Now, in 1996, I had no trouble climbing the stairway to the top of the keep, in some symbolic way conquering my now materialized nightfears. It was a bizarrely liberating and satisfying experience and I finished the tour in high spirits, pleased to have unravelled and overcome the mystery of the nightmare staircase.

And of course that twilight zone experience, motivated me to try to recall as much as I could of the rest of that school holiday. I even wrote to one of the last Rainey School teachers who might have some recollection of the excursion (the three chaperones had all passed away long before 1996). That teacher was able to find Elizabeth Logan's account, of little use since it made no reference to the Chateaux de Chillon. But each time my mind turned to the events of those days long ago, I would also recall the pain of the alcoholic judgement. Fortunately, that was one nightmare which did not materialize during the intervening years. Though I enjoy the odd drink, I was not cursed with the common Irish gene which predisposed so many of my countrymen to suffer from that disease. Not that I escaped entirely for, like virtually everyone, I had some friends and even family members who suffered to some degree. I do wonder whether that pain suffered forty years before had any beneficial effect. I doubt it.

And so I search for meaning in all of this. Probably there is none. It is simply the story of two disparate memories and their resurrection some forty years later. I wait to find out how the staircase nightmare will play itself out in the new light of reality - but it shows little sign of returning. And I wish that I had known then of the powerful forces of genetic heritage which shape all of our lives and which many struggle valiantly to counteract.

[Back to table of contents](#)

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