

## To Think of Time

*Robert Root*

To think of time--of all that retrospection,  
To think of today, and the ages continued henceforward...  
To think that the sun rose in the east--that men and women  
    were flexible, real, alive--that everything  
    was alive,  
To think that you and I did not see, feel, think, nor bear our  
    part,  
To think that we are now here and bear our part.  
    Walt Whitman, "To Think of Time"

On the morning after the night the old millennium ended, I rose groggily a little after 8:00, shuffled bleary-eyed to the bedroom window, brushed aside the curtain. Blinking back the fog of sleep, I peered outside. The remnants of my life span would cover only a minuscule portion of this new millennium. I wanted to glimpse it before stumbling downstairs to start living through its brief early scenes and my (hopefully long) final act.

In our front yard, where the north side of the house shields the ground from the winter sun, the mottled remnants of the second millennium's final snowfall lay patchy and stuccoed with late leaves from its final autumn. Away from the shadow of the house the ground was bare and dry, its snow removed by the sun and wind over the last week. The sky was clear and pale blue. The weather had not altered overnight with the new millennium. The year 2000 had arrived on the International Dateline at 6 a.m. Eastern Standard Time, passed through the midnights of seventeen intervening time zones while we waited our turn to welcome the future, and moved west beyond us for six hours more. By the time I awoke on New Year's Day most parts of the world were already on their second day in the third millennium but, from my window at least, the 20th century and the 21st century seemed identical.

As my vision cleared I gazed up and down our block. None of the other houses showed signs of life. The nonagenarian across the way was no doubt spending New Year's Day at her daughter's house, and the fraternity houses and the student rentals were still empty over the college's inter-semester recess. One car cruised slowly north on Maple Street but even the neighborhood squirrels seemed to be sleeping in. I saw no sign of the third millennium, no indication even that it was Saturday, and early January was indistinguishable from late December.

Downstairs Sue had let the dog out and let her back in, made coffee, and started working at her place at the dining room table. The dog had successfully completed her morning migration from her upstairs bed to her downstairs bed and looked at me disinterestedly, shifting her gaze without moving her head. In the living room three transparent star-shaped helium balloons decorated with gold stars, New Year's Eve mementos, swayed on ribbons tied to a foil-wrapped conical anchor-stone. Only the balloons made the day seem different from any other.

We'd seen the New Year in at the home of friends and stayed on chatting over the background of television commentary. In Times Square, while cheering people still crowded together in Y2K hats or 2000 glasses or blue and gold foil wigs, news personalities began reporting the failure of things to fail; despite their best efforts they had found nothing going wrong. They seem discouraged. Sam Donaldson, importantly stationed at the "Y2K Command Center" according to the caption on the screen, observed, "The real news is, there is no news." Lisa Stark, a lesser luminary covering mere Washington, soon after reported, "The real story is, there is no story." There being no news and no story didn't prevent the millennial anchorperson and the reporters from opining at length about non-events and the importance of the media in regard to them, but the real significance of the conversation was, there was no significance.

One of our friends observed that the problem with media coverage of the millennium was that it wasn't covering events or people, it was covering time itself, and there was nothing to show. (The event was, there was no event.) The clock ticked, the big hand moved 1/60th of a circle, the visual event was over. In Times Square a massive Waterford crystal ball plummeted slowly to light up a 2000 sign, but that was just a flashy tick of the clock. The fireworks and the confetti and the cheering throng were not the tick but the aftermath of the tick, no more significant than the empty street I awoke to this morning.

I remember once having thought, perhaps in 1950, when the 20th century was halfway-through, that I'd probably never see the year 2000. The end of the century was so far away, so out of reach. But it wasn't far; it didn't take long to reach at all. We talk of dates and events as milestones, a measure of space metaphorically indicating a measure of time, but milestones only indicate distance between one terminus and another—they are not the destination. In space they're useful as measures of how far we've come and how far we have to go; in time they measure nothing at all. What does this "milestone," the end of the second millennium of the Christian era, mean to the planet? to the solar system? to the galaxy? to the universe? Has the big hand landed on 12 for the universe or has only the second hand twitched? (Never mind the question of Chinese and Jewish and Moslem and Hindu calendars; never mind the problem that the millennial celebration should come at the end of 2000, not the beginning, and even then we're one year shy of two thousand, there having been no Year Zero.)

On New Year's Eve 1999, early in around-the-world coverage of the New Year, I saw revelers in Antarctica being interviewed. They announced how hard they were going to party, how much they hoped people back home would be partying, how concerned they were about the Wildcats' (or maybe Bobcats or Tigercats) big game on New Year's Day. They sounded, in other words, exactly like the revelers in Akron or Albany or Altoona. The significance of their being in Antarctica was, it had no significance. None in space, apparently, since location altered nothing about their behavior, and certainly none in time.

To think of time—of all that retrospection," Whitman mused. "To think of today, and the ages continued henceforward." In my study I pulled open the curtains of the window behind the computer and could not find the millennium in the back yard either. But I didn't really expect to and instead turned away from the window, to a folder of old

travel notes, trying to think my way back to one of the places where I felt I had encountered time.

On a morning in mid-June 1995 we check out of a bed-and-breakfast in Digby, Nova Scotia, and begin the drive around Annapolis Basin to Port Royal. The basin, an inlet of the Bay of Fundy, is foot-shaped. Digby nestles at the heel, the basin stretches northeast like a long thin instep, and the highway parallels the sole. All along the highway wild lupine blooms, in pinks and blues and purples, bright against brown grasses. At the end of the foot we circle around the toes, across the Annapolis River, and through the town of Annapolis Royal, and double back along the upper side of the foot, looking for the reconstruction of the Habitation at Port Royal National Historic Site.

The Habitation is a notable site in North American history. This is the first place north of the Caribbean that Europeans attempted to establish a permanent base in North America. The European settlement of Canada began here. In little over a hundred years after Columbus made contact with the New World, the French had established a presence in the northern latitudes, where they hoped to locate a northwest passage around the New World to Asia. Expeditions by John Cabot and Samuel de Champlain had already pressed on up the St. Lawrence River from the Gulf of St. Lawrence. In the early years of the 17th century Pierre du Gua, Sieur de Monts, was granted a trading monopoly by the French king, Henri IV, with the stipulation that, in addition to building a permanent trading post, he establish a colony in Nouvelle France. In 1604 colonists, de Monts and Chaplain among them, attempted to establish themselves in the Bay of Fundy on Ste. Croix Island, a small island with limited resources; half of them died of starvation and scurvy over a harsh winter. In 1605 they relocated to the site of Port Royal, on the mainland of what the French would identify as la Cadie or Acadia and what would later be called Nova Scotia.

The area around the reconstructed Habitation is now well populated, particularly on the road near Annapolis Royal, and the landscape of private homes and small businesses and farms is unremarkable, a scene that could be observed with slight variations of terrain across late 20th century North America. We could be driving between the city where we live and any number of neighboring communities in mid-Michigan. It's the Habitation, when we reach it, that reminds us where we are, not only on the map but also in time.

The site occupies a small space between the highway and the basin. The parking lot is small and a grove of trees blocks off the view of the Habitation until we emerge from them and see the outer walls, a plain façade of dark gray, rough, weathered boards. We circle the exterior towards the basin where an upright defensive palisade extends out from the main entrance. Across from the palisade, at the other end of the buildings, a cannon platform similarly juts out from the main structure, to allow defenders to catch attackers from the basin in a crossfire. We enter through the recessed entrance and find ourselves in a flat grassy inner square surrounded by steeply roofed buildings, all abutting one another tightly though varied in height and breadth. In the center of the square, where stone walks from each of the four walls meet to form a cross, is a well with a fieldstone wall and a small roof. In the grassy sections between the walks and the buildings are signs of daily labor: two tubs and a washboard in one rectangle, a barrel and a handcart in

another, the shavings-strewn workplace of the woodwright with its sawhorses, fresh cut timber, and tools in a third.

We investigate the interiors of the buildings in a clockwise tour: the forge, the kitchen, the bakery, the artisans' quarters, the chapel, gentlemen's dwellings, the residence of the company's chief officers, the storeroom, the sail-loft, the trading room, the guard room. All of the rooms that are open for inspection are sparsely furnished with furniture and implements made on the scene, using reconstructed tools of the period. The effect is to give the site a sense of newness, of recent construction. The authenticity is in the details.

I've visited many forts and historic buildings over the years and have always been conscious of the extent to which they have been reconstructed or revived. It's difficult to maintain buildings intact over centuries when they have been abandoned or neglected, as so many fortresses have been. Stone walls crumble, wooden buildings weather and collapse, nature reclaims any place without persistent preservation efforts. In some historic buildings the sense of authenticity comes from recovered original furnishings of the period—the actual desk that such and such a writer used, the actual cradle that such and such a statesman's infant children slept in, the silverware of a pattern used in the period by a different family in the same region--or from replicating known aspects of the building—a painting that copies an original portrait of a contemporary of the people who lived in the house, wallpaper specially manufactured to duplicate a design popular in the period, a chair upholstered to match the fabric in a photo of the homeowner late in life. It's something to be in the presence of artifacts that historical figures have used and touched, to feel you are occupying the same space that they moved through, as though they had stepped out just before you stepped in. It's one way to be transported in time, and it has the benefit of keeping you constantly aware of the passage of time. The age and condition of an artifact or a structure makes it venerable in your mind, in addition to whatever reverence you might feel for the cultural icon who lived there or the circumstances of the lives of people of the period.

Of necessity, the Habitation transports you in time a different way. It closes the gap between then and now by treating then as if it were now. It was never venerable but always vital. Though the reconstruction has now survived longer than the original did, in its time the Habitation seemed similarly this recent. Its timbers were hewn on the spot, its furnishings manufactured on the site by colony artisans, its walls just this rough to the touch and the smell of wood shavings on the ground just this fresh and pungent. The colonists were just as stout and robust as these bearded young men in rough blouses and breeches and floppy toques bustling through their daily chores of re-enactment. Four centuries ago none of this was historic, all of this was new. The reconstruction and re-enactment collapses time, interlocks then and now, makes the past more immediate and momentarily obscures your sense of intervening centuries without obliterating it.

So. In the way that such historic sites often do, the Habitation at Port Royal helps us think of time by letting us temporarily bridge the gap of centuries. But as we tour the Habitation that day I become aware of other connections, of feeling somehow that the bridge runs both ways and that the past is more than a casual visitor in the present.

The colony at the Habitation was short lived. The intricacies of the politics behind the occupation of the Habitation are well told in Elizabeth Jones' *Gentlemen and Jesuits*,

from which I draw the details of the following sketch of its history. The French established good relations with the Micmac people of the region (also identified as the Mi'kmaq or Souriquois) and their chief, Membertou. The Sieur de Monts, who had shared the hardships of the year on St. Croix, returned to France and remained there while Jean de Biencourt, Sieur de Poutrincourt, returned to the Habitation with a new company of men. When de Monts lost his monopoly on the fur trade and Poutrincourt and the colonists were forced to sail back to France in 1607, Membertou and the Micmacs expected them to return and made certain the Habitation remained intact and well-preserved over the interval. De Monts' attention was increasingly drawn to the interior of Canada, toward Quebec, but Poutrincourt struggled to re-establish the settlement at Port Royal. In 1610 Poutrincourt, his son Charles de Biencourt, and a company of settlers and Jesuit missionaries returned to the Habitation and restored relations with the Micmacs. Despite tension between the Protestant Poutrincourt, who wanted to build a permanent settlement at Port Royal, and the zealous Catholic missionaries, who wanted to convert the Micmac to Christianity at almost any cost, the settlers at the Habitation thrived and lived in neighborly harmony with the Micmacs. But international politics took a hand in affairs. In 1613, in one of the earliest acts that marked the conflict between France and England for control of eastern North America—a conflict which would not be resolved until France's loss of Nouvelle France at the Treaty of Paris in 1763 and which still simmers in the Quebec separatist movement of the 20th century—a group of English settlers from Virginia sailed north and burned the Habitation to the ground while all of its inhabitants were gone working in distant fields.

That was the end of the Habitation. The survivors found their mill still intact and set up living quarters there but their provisions were not sufficient and there was considerable hardship throughout the winter. Undoubtedly Membertou and the Micmacs contributed to their well-being in some way but when Poutrincourt arrived from France to inspect his settlement he found all in ruins. Poutrincourt returned to France, but his son, Biencourt, stayed on, continuing to trade with the Micmac and living a life more similar to their lifestyle than to a European one. Intermarriage between French and the Micmac helped to blur distinctions. The Habitation did not rise again until the replica was constructed in 1939 for the Port Royal National Historic Site.

As we tour the replica early in the tourist season, we are almost the only visitors. The re-enactors go about their chores but don't need to perform for us. Instead, we rely on the attentions of a guide, Judy Pearson, dressed not in period costume but in a jaunty blue expedition hat and park ranger costume. In one of the dwellings she explains the symbols on a ceremonial moosehide cloak, pointing to the picture of a moose and depictions of caribou, herons, and longhouses. She says that the two young men outside dressed as seventeenth-century French artisans are in fact descendants of French colonists. She herself is Micmac, and members of her tribe, descendants of Membertou and his followers, still live throughout the region. To me it seems fitting that this knowledgeable woman putting us in touch with the Habitation's past is herself a descendent of the native people who first befriended the Europeans. The past here is not separated from the present; it is not merely a local curio or a disembodied theme park; it is still a portion of the time in which they are bearing their parts.

Much of what we know of the Habitation comes from the writing of Marc Lescarbot, a lawyer who spent a single year in Port Royal, from July 1606 to July 1607, but whose *Histoire de la Nouvelle France*, originally published in 1609 but revised and expanded in 1617 and 1619, covers events thoroughly. At the restored Habitation one of the dwellings is made up to look like one he might have lived in. The fascinating aspect of Lescarbot for me is his literary aspirations. He wrote a number of poems at the Habitation and created the first theatrical spectacle performed in the New World. As a graduate student twenty years earlier, I uncovered a reference to Lescarbot's *Le Théâtre de Neptune* in a history of French theater when I was reading medieval, Renaissance, and Neoclassical French and English drama. I was then fascinated by court masques, particularly those of Ben Jonson, and began pursuing a literary tangent for the sheer delight in the chase. I once even considered writing a fresh translation of Lescarbot's play and still had a photocopy of the French text in my files. For two decades I had wanted to visit the Habitation.

*Le Théâtre de Neptune* is an intriguing artifact, drawing on both the court masque, in which courtiers acted out or danced allegorical roles usually drawn from classical mythology, and the civic *entrée* or entry, a festive event welcoming royalty or nobility to a city with pageantry, theatrics, and feasting. Poutrincourt and Champlain had been away from the Habitation on an expedition of exploration since early September and when they arrived at Port Royal on the 14th of November they were greeted by a spectacle written, produced, and directed by Lescarbot.

Especially considering the wilderness circumstances it was an elaborate performance. As Poutrincourt prepared to come ashore he was greeted by Frenchmen in small boats dressed as Neptune, god of the sea, and six Tritons. Neptune, dressed in theatrical buskins, a blue veil, and a flowing beard and wig and holding a trident, hailed him as "Sagamos," the Micmac word for chief, congratulated him on his valor, and extolled the triumph of France in the New World. Each of the six Tritons, except for one who spoke in a comic Gascon accent, enlarged upon that theme. Then a canoe with four Frenchmen garbed as New World Indians welcomed Poutrincourt, and the assembled group burst into a four-part song. The party came ashore, the trumpet was sounded, the cannon was fired, and the basin echoed with celebration "*& semble à ce tonnerre que Prosperine soit en travail d'enfant: ceci causé par la multiplicité des Echoz que les côtaux s'envoient les uns aux autres, lesquels durent plus d'un quart d'heure.*" ("It seemed like the thunder when Prosperina [the wife of Neptune] is in labor, caused by the multiple echoes that the coast sends itself one after another which last more than a quarter hour.") The entrance to the Habitation was decorated with the coats-of-arms of the king of France, the Sieur de Monts, and the Sieur de Poutrincourt, and "*un compagnon de gaillard humeur,*" a merry fellow, welcomed them to a banquet and invited them to empty their cups, sneeze away their "frost humors," and inhale the sweetest vapors of the feast.

Most commentators remark that *The Theatre of Neptune* is no great literary shakes but also acknowledge Lescarbot's ingenuity and energy in composing and producing the event, especially recruiting the community under his charge to pour its energies into this superfluous pageantry by creating costumes, memorizing lines, and decorating the fort and the canoes. Its achievement is more in the area of building morale than in creating

theater. Champlain, a more experienced colonist than Lescarbot, having spent two winters in New France, may have taken a page from Lescarbot's book by soon after proposing the *Ordre de Bon Temps* (Order of Good Cheer), a revolving designation of each of the gentlemen in the company as master of the feast for a day, responsible for providing food for the day's dinner; it was a scheme, as Jones notes, that produced a friendly rivalry that kept them active and healthy during ensuing winter. School children in Nova Scotia still learn about Lescarbot's *Theatre of Neptune* and Champlain's Order of Good Cheer, and both serve as emblems and perseverance and joie de vivre in the provincial spirit.

But Lescarbot's entrée is not simply the Acadian equivalent of the first Thanksgiving in Massachusetts. Whether by intention or happenstance Lescarbot wove together several strands of history in his production. As is common in the court masque and the *ballet de cour* and similar Renaissance pageants the personages of the present are linked to an ancient, epic past, to the mythological machinery of *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid*. Similarly Camoes, in his epic of Portuguese exploration, *The Lusads*, involved Venus and Jupiter in the fate of Vasco de Gama's expeditions and made Mercury accompany him on his voyages. To his classical commonplaces Lescarbot added the roles of Micmac characters, drawing no doubt on his own observations of their traditions and customs--they offer gifts of moose meat, beaver skins, matachias (quill or bead embroidery), and the promise of fish. The Fourth Indian, who has yet to catch his gift, asks for bread (caraconas) to share with his people. The Triton who speaks with a Gascon accent and the merry companion who sets them sneezing and drinking represent the immediate company of explorers. Classical literature, aboriginal tradition, and national custom all blend (lightly) in this production. And the Micmac themselves are part of the audience, observers of an unfamiliar but colorful and curious ritual. Lescarbot's little show in the harbor fascinates me, not simply because it attempts to connect the explorations of Champlain and Poutrincourt with classical myth but because the show is performed in full view of the Micmacs, who get the rare opportunity to see the Europeans displaying ancestral lore. There are complicated layers of intertextuality here.

As we tour the restored Habitation I am aware that all is replica, that the authentic artifacts of Lescarbot's time there had long ago made their way into some bibliothèque or musée in France or crumbled into dust. Yet I still feel a stirring of connection to the site. My long-ago interest in French drama, in sixteenth and seventeenth century theater, led me to Lescarbot and he in turn led me here. In that amorphous way in which what we read can become part of what we experience, *The Theatre of Neptune* and the Habitation somehow became part of my personal history. Perhaps merely being a tourist here would have been enough to connect me, but I feel all the more connected because of what I knew and imagined about the place in the past. Some things came together here once before, and visiting the site makes things come together again, connecting with the present moment as well.

All this is recollected in the tranquility of my study on a millennial morning. The recollection recaptures the moment incompletely, of course, and draws on photographs and journal entries and notes for details, but nonetheless it transports me across time. I travel back five years in a light hop and then four hundred years in a brisk bound and

pause at the threshold of the time that altered with the construction of the Habitation. I am in awe of the prospect of “all that retrospection” and it makes me conscious, almost in spite of myself, of the “ages continued henceforward.”

It’s often difficult to escape the orbit of the immediate. Moment by moment we are hurled toward the future at such relentless and frenetic speed that we can barely perceive what’s coming, let alone notice what’s gone. It’s hard to overcome the gravitational field of the here and now--the daily round of getting and spending that lays waste our hours, the attention to getting ahead or getting along or getting by. We hardly know how to ponder who we are, where we come from, why we’re here. The past is another country and our eyes are in front of our heads, always looking forward, barely distracted by peripheral vision, seldom looking over our shoulders to see how far we’ve come.

When, in the Book of Genesis, Lot and his family are spared the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, they are ordered by an angel to flee without looking back. Lot’s wife looks back, and she is turned into a pillar of salt, punishment for her disobedience, I suppose. Whatever the Old Testament moral of the story is meant to be, I’ve never been satisfied with the tale. Are we to learn from it not to acknowledge mass destruction as long as we ourselves survive? Are we to suppose that looking back itself is the fatal misconduct, that we will be punished if we wonder what’s become of where we’ve been? Are we to think that Lot, who blindly and obediently goes on, never looking back, is the admirable figure, Lot’s unnamed wife the sinful one? Why shouldn’t we think that Lot’s later unforgivable sin--the drunken and incestuous impregnation of his daughters--is a punishment for refusing to acknowledge where he comes from and who he is? To me the story would make more sense if Lot is punished for his callousness and Lot’s wife were rewarded for breaking the rules, if God could stay his hand again because he realizes that, in Kurt Vonnegut’s words, “it’s very human” to look back. Lot’s wife is the one I learn from here, even if the pillar of salt she becomes is formed by her own tears. Vonnegut says of *Slaughterhouse Five*, “This book is a failure and it had to be, because it was written by a pillar of salt.” Yes, I say, this essay too.

So. A new century or a new millennium arrives (or doesn’t yet arrive), and it hardly matters when we celebrate it because we are centered on a moment virtually devoid of context in itself. A few weeks later, where I live, I will want to stay up, as I did on New Year’s Eve, to see a total lunar eclipse but the night is overcast and it’s lightly snowing and the sky doesn’t clear until after the eclipse. I will have no more sense of the eclipse on that cloudy night than I had of the millennium on a night that was perfectly clear.

But during my visit to the Habitation, and in my memory of that visit, I do have a sense of event and I do think of time. Roughly four centuries have passed since the Habitation was constructed and destroyed, but it’s not exactly lost in time. We have Lescarbot’s texts; we have written accounts of the colony; we have a reconstruction that replicates the design of the Habitation, if not entirely its ambiance. And we have the opportunity to intersect with history--of the Micmacs, of the French in Acadia, of the court masque and public pageantry, of our own personal lives. These histories intersect whenever we examine where we are in time and what the various levels of the past have been where we are in space.



Suddenly we get that sense of awareness that Whitman speaks of, where we struggle to think “that the sun rose in the east” without us, to think “that men and women were flexible, real and alive” when we had no existence, to think that it’s only for this moment that “you and I are now here and bear our part.” This is the moment to recognize that, as Whitman says, “the law of the past cannot be eluded,/the law of the present and future cannot be eluded,/the law of the living cannot be eluded, it is eternal.” To bear our part is to observe and acknowledge this eternal law.

But a portion of bearing our part is also to record this moment where cultural and environmental and literary and personal histories intersect and leave it as an inexact milestone for those who will bear their part after us. Let them encounter this artifact and say, “Ah, there’s where we were; oh, here’s where we are.” We don’t need to depend on global coverage by media conglomerates to provide it. We need only be awake and alert to moments of intersection, we need only think of time with humility and grace. The real story is, you and I are here now and bear our part. The real news is, every moment is a milestone.