

Gifts, With Water

1

In this season of giving and receiving gifts, I am thankful for three which have come my way in the company of water. The first was given to me in the late Seventies by my friend Jim Quinlivan, a college mate and for a vivid year a colleague in the English Dept. at Purcell High School. In the summer of 1979, he agreed to serve as bow man for our Ohio River canoe trip from Cincinnati to Madison, Indiana, a voyage which entered us as a kind of footnote in the catalogue of literary Ohio River trips. Among many such journeys, one much more widely known effort was written by Literarian Clark B. Firestone, and entitled *Sycamore Shores*. A best-seller in its day, it remains highly readable, and is available on the second right-hand shelf in our Library, last time I looked. The results of our trip were a sequence of poems, *A Week of Nights Down River*, which Jim Quinlivan published as a chapbook for me. It was surprise birthday gift a year or two after we had put in at Shawnee Lookout, on the Great Miami River, and spent a week paddling down river and taking out on the levee at Madison, Indiana. The second literary result was a prose account of that same journey, replete with historical anecdotes taken from earlier river accounts, and entitled “A Day And A Night on the Late Big Bone,” which first appeared, felicitously and appropriately, in *The Licking River Review*. Both works were made possible by the gifts of physical support, literary companionship, and publishing offered me by Jim Quinlivan. He also composed an “Afterword” to the sequence of poems, in which he wrote, in part:

I don't remember in fact how the river trip was conceived. I figure the winter of 1977-78 had something to do with it. In the steady grip of cabin fever and alcohol, we talked of keelboats and packets, of Twain, Thoreau, and Lafcadio Hearn; of herons, carp, snags, and river islands; of the river business, the Corps of Engineers, and the industrial waste that the Ohio valley takes daily through its gills.

Most people who were subjected to the details of our plans during that winter thought us a bit tetchéd. They all came to the same conclusion—we'd be run down by a coal barge and wind up on the business end of Coast Guard grappling hooks somewhere around Warsaw [Kentucky]. Dick and I thought that scenario lacked romance, and we made a pact: if the barges got us, we vowed not to surface at least until Louisville, maybe even Cairo. We shook on it...

The Buddhists call the river Samsara. They say it is to be feared—which is wisdom; it is not to be resisted—which is redemption. Dick and I gave the Ohio its rightful ration of fear.

We also did not resist. But I imagine we'll have to paddle around a few more bends before we're redeemed. Such things take time on the Ohio.

It is clear what a great companion Jim was, and what fine words he had to offer in addition to his bodily exertion on the water. Now, as Richard Hunt reads this budget paper in my absence tonight, I am with Jim again, in Lafayette, Louisiana as he struggles with terminal cancer. Thanks again, my old buddy. One last bend to go. *Vaya con Dios.*

2

Just about a year ago, another water-related gift came my way, this time via the Internet. Though I am an avowed Intermittent Ideological Luddite, I feel no shame in accepting such a gift: even the Amish sometimes use the telephone. I had typed the name of my notoriously strict great-grandmother Annie Butler into some geneological site or other, and suddenly up popped the front page of *The Steubenville Herald-Star* for June 22, 1907. There in a box was an item—an obituary it turned out—for a man named Theodore Austin Butler. “He was one of Steubenville’s best known residents having resided here for over 70 years.” The obituary goes on to report that he was born in Hagerstown, Maryland in March of 1826 and that he came to Steubenville “with his parents when two years of age.” That made him a citizen of my hometown, the site of the first Land Office for the Northwest Territory, just three decades after its founding. The article continues: “In his early life he followed the river and has been over the river from Pittsburgh to New Orleans frequently.” To a life-long river rat, this was astonishing news; not only had I never heard tell of him, but his age and early life on the river suddenly made it possible to my connection-seeking mind that he might well have been aboard one of the steamboats captured in the Cincinnati Panorama, and that, even wilder, he might have been one of the ghostly figures caught leaning against a deck railing in the long exposure taken on September 24, 1848 —when he would have been twenty years old, prime age for a fireman or deckhand in the Ohio River service. My skin tingled.

This is not all. In listing his relatives, the article points out that he was married twice: to Alice Moore, the mother of Annie Butler. Alice Moore was another name I had never heard of. His second wife was a Mushrush: that odd name jogged a boyhood memory: there was a Mushrush who along with the equally interestingly-named Al Slabdorf had been an usher at St. Peter’s Church, where my parents and grandparents and now my earliest forebears had attended. (I could tell by the address in the obituary that Theodore Butler had lived in the parish.)

Thus within the span of ten minutes, I was handed, from the murkiest fathoms of time and the dangerously snoopy, nearly omniscient Internet, a great-great grandfather and a great-great-

grandmother. And this confirmed what I had previously estimated to be five generations of my family in that old, wet-footed, frontier river town. Cautiously, I accept this unexpected gift from the technoworld which, with its inestimable force and relentless invasions of the human realm, so often scares the crap out of me.

3

It came to us on the Christmas after Ngoc and Chou showed up at Purcell High School in the Seventies, during the height of the refugee movement out of Southeast Asia.

The sisters had come to us because we had a special program called the Purcell Extended Program, PEP for short, for 12 year-olds coming out of Montessori school but still a bit too young for the more-traditional rigors and bustling bigger bodies of a Walnut Hills or St. Xavier. The sisters had no English, were Catholic, and needed acclimation to American culture and access to education, but were too old (I'd guess 14 and 15) to place properly in an elementary school. I helped as much as I could, teaching basic English grammar and having conversations with them. Then Molly McEvelley, an extraordinary 7th-grader and member of the PEP program that year, offered to help. Her gift for language, which she was later to develop by learning both Chinese and Arabic, then attending the Monterey Language School and working as a communications spy for the Air Force on the island of Crete, became very useful as she taught the sisters English.

The climate of Cincinnati proved too cold; in the late winter Ngoc and Chou moved to California with the rest of their family, who had trickled into various places after Ngoc and Chou arrived in Cincinnati. That following Christmas we received a box containing a beautiful hand-made wooden boat, decorated with colored strings and ribbons and bearing a whole family of small dark-haired figures, all huddled in a craft the shape of a crib. It was from Ngoc and Chou.

The Tran family had been "boat people." They had made a perilous escape and an uncertain journey, and had arrived more or less intact. A year after that, I am sure it was their entire family, ten or twelve people, that I saw on the cover of a national Sunday supplement magazine, a success story among many in those turbulent post-Vietnam days.

And I recalled that earlier members of my own extended family, Hagues and Madigans and Moores and Butlers, and my wife's, Mehans and Molloy's, had been boat people too in another time, Irish immigrants crossing to America. Our families shared, recently or more distantly, the Trans'

story of a difficult ocean passage and arrival in a new and complex land.

Each year, when we unpacked the boat and hung it high in our Christmas tree, we told our young sons Patrick and Brendan again the story of Ngoc and Chou. Part of our common American heritage, it was and continues to be, the story of shared pasts at once dark with danger, war, hardship, and famine, and equally bright with promise—stories of hope in hope's season.

Best wishes to all for the holidays.