

**Pierre Berton**

## **Memories in Gray and Miss Jeanette Cann**

High school in my memory is a gray area. I did not really care for my teachers and they did not greatly care for me. I was told on more than one occasion by the principal that I would never amount to anything because I was clearly lazy. I spent more time editing a clandestine school newspaper than I spent on my studies. My marks were mediocre and my class standing in the bottom half. One of my worst subjects was English composition; anything I wrote was generally dismissed as "too journalistic." When my newspaper was discovered (it was typewritten and passed from hand to hand on a rental basis), attempts were made to suppress it. The school did not encourage extra-curricular activities.

When I was seventeen I enrolled at Victoria College, then a branch of the University of British Columbia in the provincial capital. It was a strange institution in many ways, housed in a fairy castle built by Robert Dunsmuir, the coal baron, for his bride. A generation of scuffling students had obliterated the parquet floors and blurred the details of the wall panelling.

We did not think of it as a "real college." With its two hundred students and its brief two years of courses, it was more like an overgrown high school. But it was cheaper to take one's freshman and sophomore years there, in those depression years, than to travel across the Strait of Georgia to the University of British Columbia.

Yet, looking back on it now, I can see how really fortunate I was to attend the college between 1937 and 1939. Its smallness, in retrospect, seems like a remarkable asset. There was none of the anonymity of the multiversity. We were a tightly-knit group, like a large unruly family. Classes were often so small that the system was almost tutorial. Our professors knew

each of us personally and because they knew us well, they took a personal interest in us.

I helped start a newspaper at Victoria College (an associate was Bruce Mickelburgh, later editor of *Monday Morning*) and I still recall with warmth and affection the very great enthusiasm that the teaching staff showed, both in the venture itself and in me personally. People as disparate as Sydney Pettit, the librarian, and Ed Savannah, our chemistry instructor, went out of their way to encourage this fledgling journalism. My high school teachers blur into a kind of a vague mass, one more or less indistinguishable from the other, but the members of the Victoria College faculty remain for me sharply etched as individuals.

The most individual of all, I suppose, was Madame Sander-Mongin, our French instructor, a tiny, stooped Frenchwoman with white hair, a pince-nez, a remarkable liquid accent and a continental philosophy of life. I still recall the moment at one of the college dances when we youths lingered at one end of the hall nervously eyeing the cluster of young women fidgetting at the other. As the music struck up Madame rushed out and began seizing each of us by an arm or an elbow (and, it seems, in retrospect, even a leg) and propelling us forcibly toward the tittering women: "Dance! Dance!" she cried. "You have so little time!"

But of all that motley faculty, the one I remember with the greatest affection was Jeanette Cann, my English professor. At first glance, Miss Cann was a formidable creature. She had a face rather like an eagle, with glowering brows, a beak of a nose and piercing eyes. Her iron grey hair was worn in a kind of pompadour. She also sported a pince-nez, with a long black ribbon and, of course, an academic gown. She was considered by many of the students to be somewhat eccentric because, like most good teachers, she spent a good deal of time in English class discussing something that seemed to have nothing to do with the course at hand; she was a bug on modern art. I had never heard of modern art before, but, because I liked to draw cartoons for the college paper, she took me under her wing and gave me an informal course of instruction. Georgia O'Keefe was one of her favourites; I can still see Miss Cann standing at the head of the class, showing us O'Keefe prints of the American southwest. And Emily Carr: "You *must* buy an Emily Carr," I remember her telling me. "You can get a big canvas for a hundred dollars. If you

have to buy, beg or steal the money, do it!" Alas, a hundred dollars then was an impossibility. I believed Miss Cann but I could not raise a ten spot.

Of course Miss Cann was not really eccentric at all. She was simply ahead of her time. She helped to change my life. Until I encountered her I had thought that I wanted to be a chemist. That was because my father, who was a frustrated scientist, thought that I *ought* to be a chemist. I had a laboratory in the basement, in which I conducted various experiments but the ham in me diverted my activities towards show-business and my experiments were more like conjuring tricks than serious science. I held chemical shows in our woodshed, charged a nickel a head and often netted a dollar on a Saturday afternoon by creating instant colours and minor explosions.

In English class Miss Cann encouraged us all to write and, sensibly, encouraged us to write about something we knew well. My first essay for her described a Klondike ritual which I had experienced as a boy in Dawson City: the departure of the last steamboat upriver in mid-October. I put some feeling in this piece because I knew what I was writing about: the starkness of the Yukon hills when the leaves had fled the trees, the smell of snow in the air, the river cold and gray hissing past the town, the little boat getting up steam and the crowd on the dock, doomed to the prison of an eight-month winter, wistfully waving goodbye to those friends and relatives who were departing for warmer climes. Miss Cann greeted this effort with the one thing that every writer must have: applause. She gave me an A-Plus and praised me publicly in front of the class. From that moment on she encouraged me constantly to write, and, basking in the warmth of that approval, I wrote.

My marks in English continued to be excellent. My marks in chemistry and physics, which were never high, dropped alarmingly. I found I was cutting work to spend more and more time on the college paper. In my own basement laboratory the Florence and Erlenmeyer flasks gathered dust. One day, during a heated meeting of the Alma Mater society, a friend saw me scribbling furiously in my note book. "Why," he asked, "why are you writing it all down?" And, as much to my astonishment as his, I blurted out: "Because I intend to become a writer."

It was the first time I had admitted it to anybody, including myself, but having admitted it, I stuck to it. That night I

told my family that I would be changing my course the following year. I was cutting out science and switching to history, government, philosophy and English. My mother was disturbed. She came from a line of journalists and she assured me that I would be poor for the rest of my life. I said that it didn't matter; I had to do what I wanted to do. She told me that chemists sometimes made as much as eighty dollars a month. I could not be moved and, to do both her and my father credit, neither of them ever tried to change my mind.

The following year I moved on to University and then into the newspaper business. I am happy to say that I kept in touch with Miss Cann, after her retirement from Victoria College. Many years later, when I was managing editor of *Maclean's Magazine*, I was asked to speak to the Canadian Club of Ottawa. After I accepted, the club wanted to know if there was anybody special I would like them to ask as a guest. I was about to say "No," when I remembered Miss Cann. She had retired to the federal capital. I gave them her address and was delighted to discover that they had not only invited but had also placed her at my side at the head table. When she was introduced there was applause; Miss Cann stood up and beamed. I hope she was proud of me; she seemed to be. I did not see her again, for she died that same year. But it has always been a matter of satisfaction to me that I was able to tell that audience in Ottawa, in her presence, that she was the one who had saved me from an eighty dollar a month job as a chemist.