

The Calgary Connection

Remembering Timothy Findley

by William Whitehead

I had the good fortune to share over 40 years of my life with Timothy Findley. The last time I saw him was on June 20, 2002—the day before he died in Toulon, France. The last time I saw him truly happy was in the fall of 2001. That was in Calgary, a city which, over the years, has woven so many of its magical threads into the fabric of our lives.

My long-time companion's birth certificate identified him as Irving Findley. His parents had not yet decided how to achieve the initials that would honour his uncle, Thomas Irving Findley—a World War I hero familiarly known as "Tif." The new baby was ultimately christened Timothy Irving Frederick Findley, which meant that for the rest of his life he would generally be known as "Tiff."

Tiff was born in Toronto in the autumn of 1930. My own birth followed a few months later in Hamilton, Ontario—but a parental move to the West meant that I grew up in Regina, where I first became aware of my Calgary connections.

When we met in 1961, Tiff was fascinated by my Calgary stories—partly because of his grandfather's experiences. Thomas Findley had been president of the company that produced Massey Harris farm machinery. He and his wife used to make regular visits to the west in the company's private railway car. Although he died before Tiff was born, his tales of Alberta's legendary hospitality outlived him, continuing to highlight the Findleys' dinner conversations all through Tiff's boyhood—along with recountings of the World War I exploits of uncle Tif. Both sets of stories contributed to the background colour of one of the best-known Findley novels, *The Wars*.

My own Alberta threads also began with a grandfather. Mine was one of eight children born as our national railway was stretching westward. He started life in Quebec, grew up in Winnipeg and lived most of his years in Regina, while his brothers and sisters all ended up in Alberta. I remember great uncle Bert and his wife Jean in



William Whitehead and Timothy Findley in Calgary 2001.

Calgary. Because of her frequent flights to Regina—paired with my interest in insects—I called her my “flying aunt.” Their daughter ultimately became one of Calgary's Stampede Queens, giving the press a field day when marriage transformed her from Merle Robinson to Merle Steir. I remember great uncle Walter and his wife Minnie, whose sister married one of the prominent citizens of Stratford, Ontario—a town that became our final home. Their daughter Jean was the centre of the first scandal to

hit our extended family. She ran away from home to become an adagio dancer. The second scandal centred on me. After acquiring two degrees in biology I declined a scholarship that was to give me a PhD from Yale and left Saskatchewan to seek work in the theatres of Ontario. But that's another story, which—as you will see—tells how I met Timothy Findley.

I particularly remember great uncle George. In his early days as a Calgary lawyer, he shared offices with a future Prime Minister, R.B. Bennett. George's participation in World War I left him emasculated by shrapnel. I like to think it was his western practicality that led him to marry Eleanor, an elegantly mannish woman with short silver hair, several pin-striped suits and a live-in companion, Edwina—my unofficial great aunt Ted.

George loved to demonstrate that Calgary was “racier” than Regina. His standard greeting to my Victorian grandmother was a bellowed “Well, Ella—how the hell's your liver!”

In the fullness of time, R.B. Bennett died and left a bit of money to his old law buddy. When George died, the money went to Eleanor, and on her death it passed to her companion, Ted, who—with no family of her own—decided to divide the legacy among four of Eleanor's nieces, one of whom was my mother. Since Tiff and I had just bought an abandoned farm northeast of Toronto, Mom decided we should have the legacy in order to begin

much-needed repairs on the farmhouse. The amount was enough to provide a new roof. Or a drilled well to replace the hand-dug source of our meagre supply of drinking water. It was also enough for a swimming pool, complete with solar heating.

Thus the R.B. Bennett Memorial Pool came into being.

At first, it was just a family joke. Then, a somewhat erudite visitor, seeing the solar heating, remarked: "That's a bit macabre, isn't it?" In the face of our puzzlement, he explained that R.B. Bennett had died in an overheated

When Margaret Laurence caught sight of the words: "The R.B. Bennett Memorial Pool," she immediately demanded to be taken home.

bath. Finally, a neighbour—amused by the whole situation—had a wooden sign professionally prepared and planted it beside the pool one afternoon when we were off picking up another friend for a weekend visit.

Our visitor was the writer Margaret Laurence—a westerner with a lifelong belief that R.B. was largely responsible for the ravages of the Great Depression. When she caught sight of the freshly painted words: "The R.B. Bennett Memorial Pool," she immediately demanded to be taken home. Temporary removal of the sign—plus a dramatic rendering of the story that explained it—persuaded her to stay, and we had a very pleasant time.

Tiff's first personal experience of Calgary was in 1965 when, finally able to afford a car, we embarked on a camping trip to the West. It was glorious to see him fall in love, first with the prairies, then with Alberta beef and finally with Calgary itself. That third affair began when we found we could set up camp near the zoo, right in the heart of the city. And as we got to know Calgary for ourselves, we gained a better sense of the originality and energy that had given rise to all the stories we had been told when we were young.

Our first professional visit to the city was in 1972. We travelled west by train as part of the research for writing *The National Dream*, a television adaptation of Pierre Berton's books about the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway. The tour went without a hitch until we were ready to catch the train heading back east. When we went to the station in Vancouver, we were told that the tracks were washed out near Kamloops, and we would have to fly to Calgary. The only problem with that was that Timothy Findley, for over 20 years, had refused to fly. And so we rented a car and drove to Calgary—at one point splashing through the floodwaters of the Thompson River that had begun to form a shallow spillway across the Trans-Canada Highway. By the time we had crossed Rogers Pass we could afford to slow down and enjoy the scenery. We stopped at the next motel, had a good sleep and then dawdled our

way through the Rockies and into Calgary. There, one of our tasks was to inspect Heritage Park, a possible filming location for some of the scenes in *The National Dream*. We were delighted to discover that the old Midnapore Station had been transplanted into the Village. Remember cousin Merle, the Stampede Queen? She had spent most of her life on her ranch near Midnapore, breeding prize-winning palominos.

There was a certain sense of déjà vu in our next Calgary visit. That was in 1974 during another research trip for another Pierre Berton television series—this time based on his history of the Klondike gold rush. After an adventurous foray into the Yukon, we ended up in Vancouver, ready once again to board the train that would take us back east. And once again, we were told that the tracks were washed out and we would have to fly to Calgary!

By then, we had come to believe that a journey to Calgary would always involve some kind of adventure, and some kind of wonderful surprise. That belief has never faded.

Take 1977, for instance, when we arrived in our own car as part of a tour promoting Tiff's novel *The Wars*. A reading was arranged to take place in a downtown branch of Calgary's library system—a splendid example of the several libraries donated to Canadian communities by the American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie.

The November night was cold. The audience—including me and a few members of the library staff—numbered only 10. After the reading, Tiff asked if anyone had any questions. One hand was rather shakily raised. It belonged to an elderly gentleman in an ancient overcoat that he seemed reluctant to remove. His question, expressed in somewhat slurred tones: "Where'd ya get that scarf?" Tiff explained that the green weaving around his neck had been the gift of a specialist in Irish literature, and was in fact a replica of the traditional sash worn by Irish storytellers. When the same gent asked the next question: "So—how much green do you make?" we realized he was there simply to keep warm—and that he had arrived already fortified with a liberal dose of "firewater." Other questions, however, led to a lively discussion of the book, and after dining on the greatness of Alberta prime rib, we went back to the hotel in a very cheerful mood.

A few years later, we returned to the same library in order to promote a novel called *Not Wanted on the Voyage*. Calgary had not lost its ability to provide startling entertainments. This is how Tiff described the evening in his first memoir, *Inside Memory*:

"Our host had cautioned us there might not be many people in the audience. This time, I was prepared for the worst: maybe two—maybe three—but, pray God, all of them sober. In we went, through the empty building to a room set aside for lectures. There was not a soul—not one. I looked around in dismay. 'Oh—this isn't where you read,' said the host. 'You read upstairs. This is only where you leave your coats and smoke your last cigarettes.' So Bill and I took off

our duffles and smoked our last cigarettes and then the host said ‘Ready?’ The mood, by now, was depressed and tense. If there was anybody up in the reading room, perhaps it would be a firing squad.

“We approached the door that would open onto the stair. I gritted my teeth, grasped the handle of the door and pulled it towards me.

“Instantly—every burglar alarm and fire alarm in the city of Calgary started to scream: ‘HE’S COME HERE TO STEAL OUR BOOKS! HE’S COME HERE TO SET OUR CITY ON FIRE!’ Naturally, I had to be prodded up the stairs. And—wouldn’t you know it? The one and only time when a performer might have been happy to play to an empty house—the place was packed—standing room only. A hundred and fifty people.”

By then, we had come to view that library as a symbol of Calgary itself—a source of endless wonders. I reminded Tiff of the two women who had created the circumstances in which we had first met. In the mid-fifties, Jean Roberts and Marigold Charlesworth had left the British theatre to come to Canada, and had chosen to settle in Calgary in the hopes that Alberta’s newly produced petroleum dollars might be used to subsidize a rebirth of Canadian theatre. Sadly, they were a few years too early for that, so they shifted to Toronto and did indeed start a theatre of their own. I joined them, first as an actor and later as their co-producer, and in 1961 we hired a young actor named Timothy Findley. And thus began my more than 40 years with Tiff.

As for Jean and Marigold—during their Calgary years, they had found work within the city’s library system, and one of them had indeed worked at our magical Castell Library. That was when they forged some lasting friendships with Calgarians—including the artist John Snow.

His name leads to our most significant visit to the city—in 2001. Tiff had been invited to be writer-in-residence at the University of Calgary, under the Markin-Flanagan Distinguished Writers Programme, which each year offers a 10-month residency to an emerging Canadian writer, as well as having visits from distinguished writers of international stature.

Tiff’s visit began just a few days after September 11, 2001—when the whole world was still in a state of shock. Immediately, we realized we could not have been in a better place at that moment. Calgarian hospitality worked wonders in restoring our equilibrium and energies. We were provided with a spiffy red car and a beautiful little house in lower Mount Royal. We were both tremendously impressed that some of the improvements had been undertaken after consultation with us—including the creation of a second bathroom. As we joined in the process of equipping the kitchen with appropriate utensils, we were absolutely delighted to discover that the former owner was an artist whose works we had been seeing for years in the home of our friends and colleagues Jean and Marigold. It was their old chum John Snow.

THE CALGARY CONNECTIONS SEEMED ENDLESS. Just like the comforting memories I have of that time, given that death was to claim Tiff just a few months later.

I can still see him at his desk in what had been John Snow’s backyard studio—working on the play *Shadows* he had begun a month earlier in the Leighton Studios at the Banff Centre. I see him at the kitchen table with his glass of wine and his crossword puzzle—occasionally reading out the clues as I prepared dinner. I remember taking one of our small, wheeled suitcases to the nearby wine store, and trundling home with a week’s supply. I can still taste the wonders of Calgary’s restaurants—from the elegance of Teatro to the funkiness of Fourth Street Rose.

If the house was one centre of our happiness, another was the University of Calgary. The month-long writer-in-residency there was one of the most pleasant and productive we have ever spent. There were informal talks, readings and interviews both on and off campus—but there was still plenty of time to devote to the writing of the play. We were recipients of the most generous and thoughtful care as well as the stimulation of enthusiastic and informed attention at every event. And with it all, we could enjoy the wonders of Calgary’s theatres and art galleries.

It is easy to see why Tiff was so happy there. And in a way, it is just as easy to understand why a life so filled with creativity, travel and care for fellow artists—as well as for fellow creatures on the planet—was beginning to wind down.

One of our final Calgary events was a public interview conducted by the CBC’s Eleanor Wachtel. As the interview was drawing to a close, Eleanor said: “Well, Tiff, you’re about to be 71. What’s next?” His answer? “Death.” Then he laughed, said “But...” and began to sing “the sun will come up tomorrow...!” And the interview ended in laughter and applause.

Well, of course, the sun is indeed still coming up, every day, still with the same brilliance and warmth as my memories of Tiff—and of how happy we always were in Calgary.

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William Whitehead, Eleanor Wachtel and Timothy Findley.