

Sunday June 29, 2014

Where's Reuben Ship when we need him?

By Jim Taylor

At my age, the year gets pretty full of anniversaries. Birthdays, graduations, deaths, weddings, divorces -- almost every week has some special significance that deserves remembering.

And so I missed an anniversary last month. May 30 was the 60th anniversary of a radio drama that laughed Senator Joseph McCarthy out of power.

On that day, in 1954, CBC Radio broadcast the first performance of a play by Reuben Ship called *The Investigator*. Like Orson Wells' earlier *War of the Worlds*, it started with a faded news beak. It arrived unheralded; it caught listeners unprepared.

It was not a particularly brilliant play. As national columnist Robert Fulford commented, it was basically one joke, endlessly repeated. And although Ship as author had some other successes, none ever reached the fame -- or infamy -- of *The Investigator*.

But *The Investigator* had two things going for it. One was John Drainie, possibly the most brilliant radio actor ever. The other was Senator Joe McCarthy, whose House Un-American Activities Committee had already gutted the American artistic community. Hundreds of musicians, artists, authors, and screen writers -- Paul Robeson, Pete Seeger, Jose Ferrer, Artie Shaw, Aaron Copeland, Arthur Miller, Zero Mostel, and Charlie Chaplin come to mind -- had their professional careers hip-checked by McCarthy.

By 1954, McCarthy had decided to root suspected subversives out of the U.S. military. His highly publicized hearings dominated network television for almost two years. Everyone knew his arrogance, his nasal whine, his reliance on implication rather than evidence.

And Drainie portrayed McCarthy perfectly. Although *The Investigator* never directly identified its chief character, no one could ever doubt that McCarthy was the intended target.

The plot

The plot, in brief, assumes that the unnamed investigator dies in a plane crash. Admitted to heaven, he quickly takes control over a committee that includes such notorious inquisitors from the past as Cotton Mather of the Salem witch trials, and Tomas de Torquemada of the Spanish Inquisition.

The committee then investigates a long list of famous people who should never have been let into heaven – Socrates, Beethoven, Marx (anyone named Marx, including Groucho), John Milton, Martin Luther, and American founders Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson.

All defend themselves by quoting directly from their historic writings. All are promptly banished from “up here” to “down there.”

The investigator eventually decides to pursue subversive influence to the very highest level. Which, in heaven, can only be God.

A furious deity banishes the investigator himself from up here, to down there. Except that Satan refuses to accept the troublemaker.

Which leaves only one alternative – the investigator has to be sent back to his previous existence. Rescuers find him still alive in the plane’s wreckage, the sole survivor. But his mind has gone. He can only whimper endlessly his narcissistic mantra: “I am the Chief... I am the Chief... I am the Chief...”

The results

Bootleg recordings of *The Investigator* circulated widely. Especially, according to many reports, in Washington DC. Although McCarthy’s eventual fall from favour is usually linked to his censure by the U.S. Senate and his chronic alcohol abuse, many still believe that the initiating factor was a Canadian satire that changed his image from fear to ridicule.

Of course, the radio play outraged large segments of the American population. The American Legion condemned it. So did Ed Sullivan. California radio station KPFK almost lost its licence in the furore that followed a single broadcast, eight years after the CBC first aired it. Even in Canada, which was less directly affected by McCarthy’s vendettas, a member of the Progressive Conservative party rose in parliament to demand that communists like Reuben Ship be cleaned out of the CBC.

No doubt Ship used the CBC broadcast to vent his personal grievances. A Canadian from Montreal who had moved to the U.S. as a scriptwriter, he was hauled before McCarthy’s Un-American Activities Committee. Ship quoted a passage from Jefferson in his own defence. When Rep. Francis Walter

challenged him, “Who do you think you're kidding?” Ship incorporated the exchange directly into his script for *The Investigator*.

Ship's defence in real life was no more successful than Jefferson's in the play. After two years of court proceedings, Ship was deported from the U.S., in handcuffs, at the Detroit/Windsor border.

And today?

Ship died in 1975. I can't help wondering what he might have done with George W. Bush's single-minded obsession with invading Iraq, with or without credible evidence of those “weapons of mass destruction.”.

Or with Barack Obama's willingness to use remotely controlled drones to execute presumed terrorists without trial.

Or with Stephen Harper's campaign to silence any scientists whose evidence disagrees with his own convictions.

Would they too have been reduced to babbling endlessly, “I am the Chief... I am the Chief...”?

The mindset seems painfully familiar, even 60 years later.

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YOUR TURN

As always, columns like last week's – on the resurgence of polio especially in war zones -- spur readers to share their own experiences.

So John Clinton wrote, “You were lucky; you did NOT get polio. My wife Mary-Ann was not so lucky. At age 6 (October 7, 1945), she was stricken with & diagnosed with polio. Hospitalization & operations tried to make her life better but no success. So she progressed through crutches & braces to an ‘FDR-like’ wheelchair to an electric scooter. College (where we met), marriage and motherhood came along the way. Working part-time was important for many years. Now she is faced with the scourge of Post-Polio Syndrome (PPS). PPS brings a boatload of real & prospective problems -- one after another. It and the normal aging process can put a good coat of rust on the ‘Golden Age.’ Our life has been a series of roller coaster rides.

We try to urge all parents to get their children vaccinated against polio.

The best scientists tell us that taking the polio vaccine will NOT cause autism or any other disease. PLEASE have your children vaccinated. WE CAN eradicate polio and give it a permanent place in our history books. Let's hope we can truly remove the scourge of polio from the face of the earth."

Terry Wiens was also a polio survivor: "As a polio survivor, the reemergence of polio is truly distressing. I am currently involved in a project to produce a video in celebration of the 60th anniversary of the introduction of the polio vaccine in 1955 (the same year I was March of Dimes Timmy).

"This is a truly avoidable disease but is reemerging for a number of reasons including the anti-vaccine movement, but definitely helped by immigrants and refugees. Some of the countries you mentioned in your article are being extended extra immigration assistance (and should be).

"The federal government's cancellation of the Federal Interim Health Program does not help to screen for many communicable diseases, polio being one of them. The virus can remain inactive in the intestinal system of an individual for some time before being activated. It is only once it becomes activated that it becomes highly contagious. Its initial symptoms are so close to the flu it can be hard to diagnose.

"If doctors in the lower Fraser Valley had difficulty diagnosing measles recently, how well will they do with polio? I remember my spinal tap well (even though I was only 3 years old) and that is about the only way to get a true diagnosis. I would not want to see my 4 year old grandson have to go through something like that.

"This is a serious disease and there is no reason for it to be around, let alone making a comeback."

Fran Ota challenged one of my assumptions: "I've never for a moment believed that the diseases we have labelled 'eradicated' really are. What we have done is vaccinate the human host so the disease cannot gain a foothold. As some people stop vaccinating, the diseases are making a comeback. The organisms which cause those diseases are still around. What we need to do is to re-educate a whole couple of generations of young people who have no idea what the diseases can do, but are afraid of what the vaccination can do. Those of us who are vaccinated, and have our children vaccinated, are not at risk. Public health education has a job ahead of it in many ways."

Bettina Gruver supplemented my reference to epidemics among North

American native peoples: “*Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-82*, by Elizabeth Fenn, is the fascinating story of war & disease as it spread across the continent...

“Thank you for elaborating on the war & disease connection as it unfolds today. It is illuminating, and a bit depressing.”

Steve Lawson had “just finished reading *Inferno* [a novel about pandemics: JT] by Dan Brown -- very timely. We are still doing it to ourselves in this world and will continue to do so through war, disease, and neglect of caring for one another.”

Christa Bedwin wrote, “Thanks for this brilliant article. Southern Alberta has the lowest rate of vaccination in North America. Highest education rate, and people all believe they are somehow smarter than the doctors through garbage they read on Facebook. I fear that if polio comes back to North America, Calgary is where it will come to.”

The only negative letter I received came from John Hannah: “I am a proud member of the Rotary Club of Kelowna. Your June 22 column on polio did a huge disservice to Rotary -- one sentence reference to Rotary clubs providing volunteers and opening doors to immunization teams.

“I suggest you should have researched your article before writing it. The World Health Organization may have set a goal in 1988 but Rotary took on polio in 1979 and then in 1985 set out to eradicate polio.”

The documentation attached with John’s letter confirms that Rotary International made polio eradication a goal before the WHO took action.

Steve Lawson’s letter (see above) also included a reference to the previous week’s column about accidents and losses: “There is not too much beyond saying I’m sorry and then just being there saying and doing whatever is helpful - or - just being there. For me it still comes down to Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s understanding of a suffering God. The spirit of God in us suffers along with us and helps us through it in so many vicarious ways.”

And still on that subject, Lurna Tallman added, “Perhaps the essential problem behind last week’s theological complaint and the sorrow you express here is the doctrine of the Fall. The notion of a perfect Eden tempts us to think

that the world at some time was better than what we face: that human communication with God was perfect, life was idyllic, and we lost it. If you take a more realistic or scientific view of the distant past, life has always been a struggle, and learning how to communicate with God is part of that struggle....”

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
