

*Sunday July 14, 2013*

## **The wrong side of the tracks**

By Jim Taylor

Do you remember that old saying about people who lived “on the wrong side of the tracks”?

Some claim that when steam trains belched soot and smoke, the upper classes preferred to place their houses upwind. Poorer people had to suffer on the wrong side of the tracks.

In my wife’s home town, prosperous citizens owned homes on the hill above the tracks. Hourly paid workers, renters, and temporary residents tended to live in less desirable houses below the tracks, and frequented a hotel commonly called “The Bucket of Blood.”

Many towns owed their existence to the railways. So everyone took for granted that the railway line would run through the middle of the town.

That was certainly true for Lac-Mégantic, a town of 6,000 or so in Quebec, near the border with Maine. At 1:14 a.m. on Saturday July 6, a train of oil tankers crashed, sending fireballs mushrooming into the night sky, reducing the core of Lac-Mégantic to a charred cinder.

At least 50 people are believed dead.

### **Falling out of favour**

In Lac-Mégantic, anything near the tracks was the wrong side.

The railway is no longer a welcome guest. Citizens are lobbying to have the tracks moved.

Lac-Mégantic brings into sharp focus a trend I’ve sensed for some time. Railroads, once considered essential for a town’s well-being, are falling out of favour.

Personally, I regret the change. A train, rumbling by on its twin ribbons of shining steel, stirs my spirit in a way no highway semi-trailer ever will. But the railways may have engineered their own downfall.

The Toronto *Star* noted that Edward Burkhardt, CEO of the Montreal Maine and Atlantic railway that crashed in Lac-Mégantic, “was named ‘Railroader of the Year’ in 1999 by an industry magazine, but his cost-cutting measures over the years as he bought and sold railways and slashed staff have raised concerns from rail workers and safety experts.”

According to the *Star*, Burkhardt railways had two crashes in Wisconsin: Weyauwega in 1996; and Appleton, 1997. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency railway fined the company \$30,000 after an unattended repair and maintenance shop leaked oil into a river in Maine.

## **Mistake after mistake**

Burkhardt himself did little to restore people's confidence in railways when he visited Lac-Mégantic after the disaster. A friend and specialist in crisis communications commented, "Burkhardt... is making mistake after mistake in his comments to the media. It's painful to watch."

Some railways install new safety measures to all cars; others maintain only the minimum required by Transport Canada. By some reports, MM&A belongs to the latter group.

Transport Canada doesn't come off too well either. Global News found that only seven of ten railway safety recommendations from a 2005 audit have been implemented. And last year, Canada's Auditor-General reported that Transport Canada had left one-third of its safety budget unspent.

Once upon a time, railway decisions made (or broke) communities. Fir Valley, a pioneer settlement not far from my home, got started on rumours that a railway line might, just might, come through there.

## **Fickle partners**

But railways are fickle partners. Penticton rejoiced when the Canadian Pacific Railway chose it for the fabled Kettle Valley line across southern B.C. Fifty years later, the CPR cancelled KVR passenger trains. Kelowna, not Penticton, grew into the commercial capital of the Okanagan Valley.

Kelowna, ironically, never had a major rail line. The KVR station serving Kelowna was 3,000 feet up a mountain side, almost at the pass where the rails dived over a ridge and down the other side.

Kelowna had to be content with a poorly maintained spur line connecting with the CPR main line 100 km north.

Now even that has closed.

On Sunday mornings, a Kelowna Pacific freight train blasted its horn at the level crossing next our church, usually right in the middle of the sermon. Last Sunday, it didn't happen. Monday morning's paper told us why – the line had gone into receivership.

Receiverships do not happen instantly. They involve a lot of legal wrangling. But with the railways' characteristic pre-occupation with their own welfare, Kelowna Pacific gave no warning of its closing. As the local paper reported, it left "numerous businesses and industries in the Okanagan, Shuswap and Thompson scrambling."

But no one seems to care much. The big shippers already depend heavily on trucks rather than trains.

## **Growing disenchantment**

By all logic, rail should be the preferred method of shipping. It's cheaper than trucks or planes. Less polluting. Capable of carrying heavier loads.

Perhaps that collective shrug was another symptom of growing disenchantment with the railways' fixation on cost-cutting at the expense of customer satisfaction and public safety.

Even Calgary Mayor Naheed Nenshi had harsh words for the mighty CPR when a bridge over the swollen Bow River sagged, nearly dumping several tank cars filled with oil into the raging river.

The railways, as Pierre Berton documented in *The National Dream*, built Canada. I wonder who will hold Canada together as the railways find themselves on the wrong side of their own tracks.

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## YOUR TURN

Anything written about the Middle East is about as risky as dipping one's toe in a vat of boiling oil.

John Finlay recalled seeing "King Abdullah II of Jordan as a guest on the Daily Show with Jon Stewart last fall. His main point was that all of the countries in the area need to sort out their own processes. Jordan made revisions to about a third of its constitution BEFORE they held elections. Egypt held an election and then expected the newly elected government to make changes to the constitution. Abdullah suggested 10 months ago that things would not go well in Egypt because of that choice.

"I am amazed by how prescient King Abdullah's comments were."

Cliff Boldt drew parallels with Canada: "With Canada rapidly becoming a petro state, thanks to Harper, we too will be drawn into those struggles. We already lost 160 of our young men and women in Afghanistan, but more is to come. Our mainstream media has been dragged into the petro state mentality and that is why it reports as it does. We are on a search for a credible enemy."

Rob Ingram: "I doubt you are off base on your oil company article at all. I read a story a year or more ago that Iraq, Afghanistan, and part of Pakistan were all about getting oil from Iraq to a new huge refinery in India where the US was going to get future gasoline supply, with new refineries being so unpopular in the US. I have no idea if it is true but they are obviously there for more than just tracking down Al Qaeda."

Rob recommended three books: *Private Empire*, by Steve Coll; *Blackwater*, by Jeremy Schall: "and a third book that discussed how Bush implemented 'omnibus' bills to push the oil agenda. Sound familiar? I have been clipping articles about things Harper has been doing for the past six months, and seeing it together it is an amazingly clear pattern of pro-oil."

Isabel Gibson wrote, "This reminds me a bit of a question going the rounds when Bush Sr. invaded Kuwait: 'If Kuwait exported broccoli, would we still need to liberate it?'"

But Isabel thought my conspiracy hypothesis went a little too far: "I like to look for a simpler explanation that doesn't require conspiracy, for two reasons. First, I think people have enough trouble doing the

things we plan to do when they're simple and above-board, without getting into things that are complex and illicit. Second, I have an emotional objection: I don't want to believe that people do bad things just for money.

“Regarding the contention for control of all these countries, people fight

- a) over something worth having, or
- b) when they can see that fighting might get them something better, or
- c) when they have no choice but to defend themselves.

To me, that adequately explains the unrest in those non-democratic countries with oil — conditions aren't great, and yet they could be better.”

Judyth Mermelstein had some similar insights: “May I propose a different interpretation of how fossil fuels feed into popular uprisings? Something that tends not to make the news but is obvious when one looks past the headlines? That is, the degree to which countries rich in petrodollars tend to keep the new money in so few hands, while the majority of the population are struggling to stay afloat.

“Agricultural people who are desperate have neither means nor leisure to protest effectively, and it is easy enough to have the army or a private contractor intimidate or kill any villagers who try. But when you drive those people off the land into the cities, you not only create a critical mass for protest but highlight the common interest of the whole non-elite in agitating for their human rights and a just share of the nation's wealth.

“I don't believe it takes outside agitation to get that kind of movement going, though obviously sometimes foreign investors or NGOs do have some skin in the game. The western media, however, don't take an interest until there are thousands in the streets -- preferably hundreds of thousands, with filmable violence...

“When things get truly desperate, people are willing to die if need be to get some kind of constructive change.

“Venezuela and Bolivia are special cases, in the other direction. There, citizens finally got the kind of change they wanted: some respect for their human rights and some steps towards a fairer distribution of things like education and health care and opportunity. Somehow, the wealth from fossil fuels and minerals is being kept by the nation and used for things most of the population can benefit from...which is why the U.S. is so keen to see those governments fall.”

Steve Roney questioned my central thesis: “I think ‘Western oil interests’ is a straw man, like ‘greedy capitalists.’

“It is not at all clear which is best for oil profits, an ample supply of oil, or a shortage of oil with higher prices. Specific oil companies might fight over this or that field, or this or that market, but in terms of ‘oil interests,’ anything like this is zero-sum: what is good for one oil company, is bad for the next one.

“Governments do have fixed interests in oil, as a strategic material. So Western governments might want to intervene in order to preserve their economies and their military capabilities. But if this is the motive, the West is hardly your prime suspect. The US gets very little of its oil from the Middle East -- 13%. The Gulf supplies only 14% of Europe's oil. The biggest consumers of Middle East oil are China and Japan. Surely, then, the finger of suspicion points to them, not to ‘Western’ interests.”

Jorgen Hansen endorsed my views, and went on, “You must now do an article on the Canadian banks: read ‘Towers of Gold, Feet of Clay’ for a warm up. Our Canadian banks are big into offshore banking for the wealthy to avoid Canadian taxes. Banking is now so quick, just a punch of the computer key and your dollars are moved. The use of dummy companies prevents the government from trailing the dollars. The estimate is \$76 trillion sitting in offshore banking -- almost five times the U.S. debt!”

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#### TECHNICAL STUFF

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

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca).

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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](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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#### 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](mailto: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](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://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](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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