

# The Genesis of the Niagara Falls Poetry Project by Andrew Porteus

*Life-changing moments are not always as obvious or as dramatic as a soon-to-be ex-spouse handing you an ultimatum to get a suitcase packed and be out of the house in an hour.*

And sometimes those life-changing moments become literary inspiration that turn into life projects. One of mine began innocently enough sometime in the mid-1990s, although I didn't recognize it as such until decades later. I was a reference librarian at the Niagara Falls Public Library researching the history of hydroelectric power at Niagara Falls when I ran across a dusty volume, *The Niagara Falls Electrical Handbook* of 1904. While scanning through the book, I noticed a poem fragment — untitled and unattributed — about Father Hennepin at Niagara Falls. Thinking that it was an odd place to publish a poem, I continued with my research; after all, I'd run across poems about Niagara Falls in other places you'd not really expect them: They were in traveller's guides, old railway schedules, history books, and the like.

For some reason, this poem fragment kept niggling at me. I eventually searched for the poem again (for, in true librarian fashion, the book had been reshelfed in its rightful place after I finished the research), and photocopied it for the library's "Niagara Falls in Literature" vertical file, with other examples of poetry and prose that had been collected from other sources over the years. The seed of an idea for publishing an anthology of poetry about Niagara Falls began to take hold; it had been many years since one had been published.

The more I searched out Niagara poetry over the following years, the more I realized a print anthology was impractical — there were just so many poems out there to examine and selecting which ones to include was going to be a monumental task with difficult decisions to make. Should this be a literary anthology, with only “the best” of Niagara literature in it? There are many, many poems of dubious literary quality that have insights into the social and historical character of Niagara Falls, including the (two) cities that are also worth examining. Should they be included? At some point, I decided a website would be a good way to gather both types of poems to let readers make the decisions. The Niagara Falls Poetry Project website was thus born in 2001.

Fast forward to 2016, and the imminent approach of my (early) retirement. There were now over 300 poems on the website and many more waiting to be added. I had long wanted to explore the poetry of Niagara in more depth and at a more academic level, so I decided to get a second master’s degree in Popular Culture at Brock University. Popular Culture may seem an odd choice, but it was the social and historical aspect of poetry combined with its literary quality that fascinated me; Popular Culture seemed to offer the chance to examine all of these aspects in a way that made sense to me. What I hadn’t reckoned with was maintaining a grueling student and Teaching Assistant schedule while trying to keep in close contact with the family. It is ironic that I am so busy doing course work that I have very little time to spend working on the website that was the very reason for starting the MA in the first place.

Examining the poetry on the site on a more academic level has shown me that even though Niagara Falls remains pretty well unchanged over our lifetimes, inspiration for writing about them can come from a particular aspect that catches the author’s

imagination. Diverse sources such as a flower waving in the mist, the roar of the falls, an event that takes place there, or the moon reflected on the brink of the falls can result in wonderful poetic (and prose) pieces. From quick, 15-minute writing sessions that produced one of the most anthologized of Niagara poems (Brainard), to a prolonged writing period with different versions (Heredia, Lindsay), poems abound in Niagara Falls. Some poets are inspired to write on different aspects of Niagara (Sigourney), while Crapsey, inventor of the poetic form the cinquain, meticulously crafted one of the most exquisite poems on the website. The search for, and discovery of, poems reflecting these many aspects of Niagara Falls has fuelled my obsession with the Falls and prompted me to share them with the world through my website.

Oh, and the poem fragment that started all of this? I found the full poem early in 2019 — it's Peter Porter's "A Legend of Goat Island," which was published in a limited edition of 100 in 1900. Running across that one poem fragment buried in an obscure book 30-some years ago became a truly life-changing event for me.