

# Dispatches

NOTES ON THE WRITING LIFE

INSPIRATION /

## 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 as 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 the ones to be included was going to be a monumental task with difficult decisions to make. Should this be a literary anthology, with only

"the best" of the Niagara literature in it? There are many, many poems of dubious literary quality but 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 ([niagarapoetry.ca](http://niagarapoetry.ca)) 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, with 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 the Popular Culture Department at Brock University. Popular Culture may seem an odd choice, but the social and historical aspect of the poetry along with the literary quality fascinated me, and Popular Culture seemed to offer the chance to examine all of these aspects in a way that made sense to me. I was encouraged to study full-time. What I hadn't reckoned with was maintaining a gruelling student and TA 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 M.A. in the first place.

Oh, and the poem fragment that started all of this? I found the 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 thirty-some years ago became a truly life-changing event for me.

*Andrew Porteus first saw Niagara Falls when he immigrated to Canada at the age of nine. He founded the Niagara Falls Poetry Project website ([niagarapoetry.ca](http://niagarapoetry.ca)) and continues to be obsessed with the area. He and his wife, Louise, have five children between them and nine grandchildren. He continues to contribute to Niagara Falls literature and published his photography of the area in Niagara Mornings.*

