

# CREATIVE MEMORIES

In Honour of the Polish Soldiers Who Died at the Battle of Fort Erie

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## Introduction

Most of the written history on the War of 1812 is done from three perspectives – the British, the Canadian and the American. Very little of this history reflects the perspectives of marginalized groups who were also participants in the war. The involvement of First Nations, Black participants and the Coloured Corps, and the numerous Europeans who were also engaged in the war is not well documented. This poetry project is an attempt to bring a Slavic perspective to the War of 1812.

Poles and other marginalized groups don't fit into the grand narrative of the War of 1812. Therefore their role has been subordinated; this work is a form of resistance to this forgetful grand narrative and an attempt to balance the historical scales. As Michel Houellebecq in his novel *Platform* writes "I couldn't help thinking that if the prisoners had been Polish or Russian there would have been a lot less fuss." Why is it that when the warriors were Polish, Black or Native, it seems to matter less? This work is a small effort to make it matter more.

There were a significant number of Polish soldiers in the De Watteville Regiment, a few in the De Meuron Regiment and a few sprinkled throughout some of the Canadian regiments. Of course, there were also a few on the American side, since every good war attracts at least a few Poles. Those in the De Watteville Regiment served in several battles including the attack on Oswego and the Battle of Fort Erie, where many of them died. Very little is known about these Poles, - who they were, where they came from and what they thought. Some of the poems in this collection can be called works of the imagination, a creative memory, as they create some of the possible experiences, thoughts and beliefs that these men shared, without having access to first-hand historical records.

As a Canadian of Polish and Scottish descent the forgotten Polish ghosts of this historical past haunt me, just as do so many of the Scottish exiles who also haunt this Canada (but that is a story for another day). This series of poems brings those ghosts into a glimmer of the light of day and begins to relieve them of their need

to haunt. I want to be able to walk across the battlefield at Fort Erie without wondering why the several hundred Poles who fought here have been entirely forgotten. After all, the past is never dead and is often visited in the present. Even a forgotten past defines who we are to ourselves and to others.

It must be remembered that all established history can never be justified by the claim that this is the way that such things “really were”. There is always room to challenge the established consensus. Historians can’t simply tell us how things were, or how they are, because all meaning is socially encoded and mediates how we see things; history borrows from contemporary social conventions. Let’s not forget the role of Polish soldiers in the War of 1812, a forgetfulness brought about through the lenses of contemporary conventions. Welcome to a new and poetic look at the War of 1812.



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## **Contemporary Poems from another Era**

With any war  
There is a great need for diversion  
For balls and concerts  
For good conversation  
And enduring poetry



## **To the Year 1812\***

To soldiers thou art the year of war  
Men tell your stories  
And sing of thy glories  
Poets speak of thee  
Filling hearts with strange premonitions  
And memorable distinctions  
That was Canada in the Year 1812

---

\* With thanks to Adam Mickiewicz, Pan Tadeusz, trans by Watson Kirkconnell (University of Toronto Press, 1962), 311





## Why Brock?

I longed to understand  
Why Brock, who explained nothing,  
Charged up the heights at Queenston  
Why Macdonnell followed him?  
Why Shaeffe went the long way around?

Why the screams of Indians,  
(Who lost everything),  
Scared everyone to the last warrior?  
Why in the last, despairing battle,  
Did the last Uhlan fight at Mt. St. Jean  
Alongside the fallen eagle in the rain\*  
To understand the pure terror of a dying oak  
And those who died on the hills  
Of San Domingo\*\*, Snake Hill or the Thames  
So far away from everything they knew  
Of totems, poppies and home  
Sweet grass, and the sweet smell of lilacs

I longed to understand the dead  
What did the last veteran of the War of 1812 think as he lay dying?  
Was it different from the dying veterans of World War II or Afghanistan?

Today's post-modern questions all values,  
No acceptance of loyalty, duty and honour  
What happened to the virtues of 1812?  
The heroes of Thermopylae and of Fort Erie:  
Why did we decide to forget them all?  
When did courage and honour become politically incorrect?

Why, in our age of the anti-hero,  
Does Brock remain the hero of Upper Canada?

\* This monument "The Wounded Eagle" on Mt. St. Jean at Waterloo is dedicated to the last combatants of the Imperial Guard. It was erected on the spot where the last square of the Guard stood and where, as the legend tells, General Cambronne shouted "Merde" at the British in the spirit of the Guard which dies but never surrenders. On one side of "The Wounded Eagle" there is a partially hidden plaque dedicated to the members of the Polish Lancers of the Imperial Guard Cavalry.

\*\* Polish Legions were sent by Napoleon to put down a slave uprising on San Domingo. Some of the few survivors ended up with British regiments in Canada.



## Vanishing into History

Vanishing into history  
Doesn't mean that you are gone in perpetuity  
Coming out of Poland's historical dry spell  
When a whole nation vanished  
And then like a phoenix ascended  
So can your chronicle be newly versed  
When blessed or cursed  
With a Polish bleeding heart;  
By giving sorrow words\*  
The madness of history  
Yields its mystery  
To razor-sharp anger and verity

We are so much more interesting when angry,  
And anger allows you to rewrite a necrology,  
Chosen as one possible, and probable, apology

---

\* "Give sorrow words", Shakespeare, Macbeth, Act IV, Sc. Iii (209)





## **The Purpose of 1812 Poetry**

Why write 1812 poetry?  
To haunt the reader!  
I want you to be haunted  
Not by me  
But by those who died forgotten  
I want you to be troubled  
By the heroes of 1812  
The ghosts and spectres of our past  
All those that you have forgotten

To feel their pain,  
Their hunger, their tiredness  
The absolute heat of wool in summer  
To ask how they struggled with ongoing sickness  
To understand their duty and valour  
Their ultimate death with honour  
The valiant soldiers of 1812

I want you to be haunted  
By the specter of true courage  
Not by the appearance of red serge  
Or by a corps of re-enactors  
But by men of blood  
Marching through unforgiving swamps, forests  
On the way to their death

I want you to be haunted and obsessed  
To feel what we have lost  
Through political correctness  
And the loss of our history  
To be shocked by the dissipation of virtue  
And of personal values

---

\* With thanks to the first three pages of Andre Breton's *Nadja* (Grove Press, 1960)



How very pleased I am to thank Andre Breton  
For sharing his idea of the haunted  
How very pleased I was  
How elated I was, how haunted  
To find Andre Breton  
At the local Goodwill  
I wonder who delivered you there  
To assist with the deliverance  
Of the men of 1812  
Thank you, Andre



### **I Dream of Home**

I often dream of home  
And the family I left years ago  
I yearn for that comfortable abode  
But for me there is no home-bound road

When I left, Podlasie was under fire  
Our wooden manor house in flames  
The avenue of aged lindens fell before the attacks  
Of the Russian Tsar and his Cossacks

That way of life is gone forever  
Yet, I dream that I will go back there  
That I will see my Mother and my Father  
Sister Hania and Stas', my Brother

But like so many other Poles  
Throughout the annals of our history  
For me there is no homecoming waiting  
War and cruel fate have taken everything

But I still have my faith,  
My fading, creative memories  
The dreams of the homeless  
The romantic illusions of the eternal Pole







the 104th (New Brunswick) Regiment of Foot,  
under The command of Colonel Alexander Halkett,  
with Lieutenant Frederick Shaffalisky  
(The sole, lonely Pole in the regiment),  
along with Johnny what's-his-name,  
arrived in Kingston on April 12, 1813,  
having covered a total of 1,125 kilometers





## March, March, Dąbrowski to Canada

March, March Dąbrowski,  
From the soil of Italy to Poland\*  
And so for 200 years I went on tours  
For our freedom and yours

March, March Dąbrowski,  
I will follow you with my uhlan's lance  
And I marched on to France  
To Italy, to Spain, to San Domingo

March, March Dąbrowski,  
But I took a wrong turn  
When I sailed down cold and weary  
To Chateauguay, York and Fort Erie

Oh Canada, take a bow!  
My English is comic  
My hat, they think, is Napoleonic  
So they assume I'm a peasant  
In this historical present  
Yet, I am a member of the *szlachta*,  
The Polish samurai, the warrior class  
I abide by the virtues of that military brass  
Of courage, honour and duty

I am a Pole and a Slav  
But I am also a Scot, Swiss, Dutch and a Swede  
All us Brits fighting for a Canada freed  
Being "British" covers a great many sins

March, March Dąbrowski,  
But Canada also redeems  
Through a great many hopes and dreams  
Of life in this peaceable kingdom

Oh Canada, take a bow!

---

\* "March, March Dąbrowski" is a refrain from the Polish national anthem. In the anthem, the Polish soldiers under General Dąbrowski, are marching from Italy to Poland all the time fighting for a free Poland; Canada was a long distance from their march for independence.



## For Your Health and Ours\*

### *(A Drinking Song)*

Of course, they drank vodka, mead and wine  
Whenever they could  
Polish vodka, like good Catholics should

*Na Zdrowie, Your Health!*

And down the hatch

*Czysta wódka!*

Vodka neat!

Let us drink to “lips as sweet as fruit in the tree”\*\*  
Be there not a drop of vodka for a thousand miles  
We will down this brandy from those Protestant Isles

*Na Zdrowie! Your Health!*

And down the hatch

*Czysta wódka!*

Vodka neat!

Memories come with farm scents  
Lilacs, sugar beets and fresh peas  
The green of spring and a land at peace

The tart taste of gooseberries  
The smell of cooked cabbage  
The sound of that horse and carriage

*Na Zdrowie! Your Health!*

And down the hatch

*Czysta wódka*

Vodka neat!

Of country fairs and dancing bears  
Of jugglers and fire-eaters  
And women, tempting dancing women

---

\* Of course this is in reference to the Polish saying started by the Polish Legions of Napoleon, “For Our Freedom and Yours”

\*\* The Drinking Song, from *The Student Prince*, lyrics by Dorothy Donnelly



With money we don't have, we gambled  
And the lives we don't own, we mishandled  
My body is for hire, but my spirit can still inspire

*Na Zdrowie!* Your Health!

And down the hatch

*Czysta wódka*

Vodka neat!

Let's drink to Canada's First Poles  
And the Indians who were not the only poor souls  
To lose more than the War of 1812!

*Na Zdrowie!* Your Health!

And down the hatch

*Czysta wódka*

Vodka neat!

If we can fight for our freedom and yours  
Let's drink to your health and ours  
And all those brave, lost souls

*Na Zdrowie!* Your Health!

And down the hatch

*Czysta wódka*

Vodka neat!

Vodka, please go to my head  
Mead, sweeten my life  
Wine, help me to dream  
Give me a happy escape from something so grim  
With a Polish laugh and a grin





## So What Do We Know About Them?

So what do we know about them?  
Very little, with which to praise or condemn  
You will find no diaries or letters  
Sent home by Polish Officers  
For there were no officers, the Soldiers of Napoleon  
Could not equally serve the King of Avalon

So what did they eat?  
Hard bread, salt pork for meat,  
A few vegetables in a perpetual soup  
All cooked over open fires  
With salt, brandy and molasses  
All mixed with a few ashes

The Poles did better than most  
For they knew the ways of the forests  
These involuntary tourists  
With berries, mushrooms and herbs  
They turned that doubtful stew  
Into something not quite cordon bleu

So did they wash often?  
The need for bathing was forgotten  
Disease was common, soap less so  
Clothes and chamber pots were shared  
Their bones show extreme malnutrition  
It was neither an easy nor a long life

So where did they live?  
In tents or on huts  
Travelling along roads or by boat  
“Tiger” Dunlop wrote that they made excellent shelters\*  
Learned from living off the land  
Chosen by their high command

---

\* Dr. William Dunlop (1792 – 1848) also known as Tiger Dunlop was an army officer and surgeon during the War of 1812. He recorded his experiences in *Recollections of the War of 1812* (Toronto: Historical Publishing Co., 1918)



So did they like it here?  
It would seem very unlikely  
Discipline was tough, punishments were harsh  
Some were hanged, many felt the lash  
Many deserted and were never heard from again

Yet, up Snake Hill charged these brave men



### **What Did They Believe?**

What do mercenaries believe?  
You men of principle  
Who fought for freedom  
Before those prison ships

You believed in God,  
Blessed Mary and all the Catholic virtues  
But also in wood sprites  
The little people of the woods

In popular remedies  
Taught by your Mothers  
In planting after Easter  
And blessings for the fields

Yes, the world might end  
But first there must be twelve courses  
After the first star  
Before dinner on Christmas Eve

You believed in picking mushrooms



After a good rain in the woods  
That a dog was your best friend  
And yes, you did love your horse

As gentlemen, you kissed the hands  
Of city ladies and village misses  
Wearing ribbons and village dresses  
Reminding them of love's lost caresses

You believed in home-made jam  
Or a slice of delicious ham  
On fresh buttered bread  
Before war became widespread

You trusted warm milk  
Straight from the neighbors' cow  
And that mean old goat  
That never failed to butt

Yes, you had beliefs  
You foreign mercenaries of freedom  
In battles to be won  
And spirits never to be defeated





## Names

Now, Polish names have never been easy  
But from what strange dream did these names erupt?

What did that Swiss officer think?  
When he asked for your name and birthplace  
As you stood before him  
And gave your name and town  
“Michał Andruszewski z Mogoszków”

What did you, a Polish soldier, think?  
When you became  
“Michel Anrosisqui from Magasau”  
Or  
“When Pawel Zielinski from Grudziądz”  
Became  
“Paul Shelenzky from Greischuntz”  
Or when Zborowszczyzna became Iboroschina

Were you transformed, or just translated  
Were you annoyed at having your name so mis-  
stated?  
Or was this just the latest inconvenience  
In a series of new adjustments  
On that downward  
Spiral of Polish  
Changing  
Realities

The saving grace  
Is that when you said ‘Urodzony w Polsce’  
He wrote “Né en Pologne”  
Translated easily as “Born in Poland”  
So that who you were  
And why you were there  
Has not been mistaken or forgotten





## Creative Memories\*

Since there are no records,  
No memories, no stories  
We will make them up for you

So did you think of home?  
When you died at Snake Hill  
That small wooden house in the country

Six rooms, one was your study  
A table littered with papers  
Turkish firearms on the walls

Whips, a collection of horse shoes  
The family silver, spurs on the wall  
Hunting trophies, a stuffed boar

The family sabre, the sign of *szlachta*  
A portrait of Kosciusko  
In a Rembrandt-darkened frame

Father drinking a warm glass of mead  
Cold chicken and raisin bread for breakfast  
All caught up in a magnificent mustache

Running barefoot in the green grass  
The beauty of sunflowers  
The smell of curdled milk

The warm golden light  
Of the luminous sun  
Illuminating the "Polish Rider"\*\*\*

Memories, all housed in birch  
Old comfortable chairs  
Books on a dusty shelf

The usual flotsam of home  
Gathered along my way  
To create for you, the mementos of memory

---

\* With thanks to Ivan Turgenev

\*\* Painting by Rembrandt



## The Duel

Yes, there was once a duel fought  
Before the walls of Fort George  
Hidden by the trees of Paradise Grove  
Fought over a trivial but death-justifying insult  
When a British soldier insulted his Polish brother  
And lead to the death of our hero  
Once the son of a fashionable regiment  
Reduced to De Watteville's mercenaries  
Were they a motley crew?  
Or just superfluous  
A soldier of futility  
In a war not their own

He was a man of difficult character  
An unfortunate man, unhappy,  
Fighting a never-ending fight  
Against a futile history

Think of Napoleon's Polish Lancers  
Tall black *czapkas*  
Red and blue cockades  
White gloves, skin-tight white breeches  
Thigh-high black boots  
Waiting for the bugle call  
Urging them to charge

Our duelist was beyond all this  
As he fell under a British Sword  
And the dark, dark oaks  
Of Paradise Grove  
Far away in Niagara





## **We Sing of Prisons**

Dartmoor Prison\*  
Built in the wilds  
By French prison labour  
To replace those prison hulks  
Those derelict ships  
Appalling in the extreme  
To house those Napoleonic prisoners  
Who brought “seeds of infection”  
And ungratefully died  
On those blasted, unescapable moors  
Of St. Michael and All Angels

The story is sung  
Of one, Charles Domery, a Pole  
Who ate every thing  
And when captured  
Chewed on the limbs  
Of his fallen comrade  
True brother in arms

At Dartmoor  
He preferred cats and dogs  
And candle wax  
Accused of being too Polish  
He wrote ‘Vive la Republique’  
On the prison wall  
With his own blood

---

\* From 1803 to 1815 Britain was at war with Napoleonic France and many thousands of prisoners were taken, including Poles. To help accommodate them redundant warships were commissioned as floating prisons known as ‘the hulks’. Conditions in these hulks were very bad, poor sanitary arrangements, little exercise, lack of fresh air and a poor diet, the death rate rose to an unacceptable level and a prison on land was decided upon. Princetown on Dartmoor was considered a suitable location and that is how Dartmoor Prison came to be built.



He was a big man  
Rather thin, in spite of his brutal diet  
And was well-liked  
By his fellow inmates

These inmates gambled, dueled  
These Romans, fought and killed  
For food, clothing and tobacco

Yet, when they were buried  
In the prison yard  
Over their graves  
Was written  
*'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori'*  
“It is sweet and right to die for one's country”



## **Snake Hill**

Snake Hill is a hill that was  
If you look for it you won't find it  
Where it stood, houses now stand  
But no longer on a hill  
There are no snakes, no hill  
On Snake Hill

There is no plaque to identify the once sandy  
outcrop  
But the space it occupied is still there  
Right on Lake Erie  
Where it rushes into the Niagara River



The sense of courage, agony and death  
Still lingers there,  
Two hundred years ago  
Brave British Regiments  
Including the Poles of De Watteville  
Charged Towson's Battery  
And the brave American soldiers  
Occupying Fort Erie  
And that sandy hill  
Repulsed them  
But not before many died  
Before Snake Hill  
Some floated down the river  
Many are buried  
Beneath the stone monument  
"Pro Patria"

Yet, I wonder  
Did some swim the river?  
Fight the current  
Escape the bullets  
Make that choice  
For freedom  
Some would have failed  
Wounded, they drowned  
But I hope at least one made it  
Made that return trip  
Got on that Freedom Train  
Followed that Southern Cross  
To a new life





## **Fort George and The Commons**

It is ironic that Fort George and The Commons  
Housed two Polish armies  
One in 1814 and one in 1917

That is the strange coincidence of Fort George  
Paradise Grove and Half-Moon Battery  
They witnessed those armies  
Who did not know one another  
Who were not aware of the strange irony  
But who shared a common passion  
For an independent Poland

It is up to us to remember  
That once beyond this wooden palisade  
Of old Fort George  
Stood men of character and courage





## After the War

My war is done  
I was captured  
We lost our part of Europe

I am so tired  
Yet, we are ordered to attack  
Yet one more time  
To attack this unknown fort  
This Fort Erie  
*Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła\**

A long time back  
We heard the golden words  
“For Our Freedom and Yours”  
And off we marched  
To serve our land, and our Saviour  
*Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła*  
*Kiedy my żyjemy*

We lost as only Poles can lose  
Fought to the end  
At Mont St. Jean  
Where more than one eagle fell  
Now we rot in prison ships  
*Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła*  
*Kiedy my żyjemy*  
*Co nam obca przemoc wzięła*

Now in other ships  
We sail to Canada  
And now I am Swiss  
A mercenary  
As if a true Pole could ever be such  
*Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła*  
*Kiedy my żyjemy*  
*Co nam obca przemoc wzięła*  
*Szablą odbierzemy*

---

\* The first line of the Polish National Anthem – “Poland is not yet lost”



Take away their flints!  
Have them charge at night  
They must be brave  
Even though it is not their battle  
Not their fight!

It is their time to die  
As they ran to be forgotten  
With the words  
*“Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła”*  
Ringing in their Hearts

No one heard their song  
No one remembers them  
To the victor go the spoils  
There was only one spoil  
For the Poles of 1812  
*Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła*





## The Fantasy of 1812

From that other world  
Of dreams, imagination  
And fantasy  
The eyes of the deluded poet  
See with the truth of romantic tragedy  
Those knightly virtues  
Honour, duty and courage  
And the absolute glory of war

Fight to the end, to the last man  
Against, the destructive forces of history  
Demand your right to endure  
To be remembered  
Before being dismembered  
By the re-written word

Soldiers mourn for their weapons  
“When the last enemy shall cry with pain”<sup>\*</sup>  
All history is in bad taste  
A vile pornography  
And should be banned  
Like all re-written taboos

Imagine the barbarian cry of truth  
As all they knew was destroyed  
And then historians  
Applied the final cut, the last word  
And destroyed their final truth,  
Their last cry of anguish

---

\* See Adam Mickiewicz, Pan Tadeusz, translated by Watson Kirkconnell (University of Toronto Press, 1962), p.2 & 3., lines 59 & 103





## Nomads

Wandering the earth  
Over the many years  
On land and sea  
Cold and hot  
Among many peoples  
As uninvited guests  
But in the evenings  
Those songs of home  
Polonez, mazurka, oberek  
Brought them sadly, happily home  
As they hung their heads  
In melancholy  
Or enjoyed the evening of dance  
But in the end they heard  
The triumphant march  
Dabrowski's Mazurka  
„Jeszcze Polska nie Zginela”  
And the whole camp  
Stood as one  
And sang





## **200 Years Ago Forgotten Finally Remembered**

As the musket ball  
Crashed through my chest  
What did I feel?

As the cannon ball  
Shattered my body  
What did I think?

As the smoke and cannon fire  
Closed in on me  
What did I see?

200 Years Later  
No one cares what you felt, thought or saw  
Buried under the sands of Erie Beach

A large granite pillar  
Serves as a lone footnote  
To the Poles of De Watteville

Waiting for someone to notice  
To walk by, to remember and wonder  
Who lies beneath these sands?

***Veni, vidi, recordati!***





## Monuments

My Father told me  
To follow Napoleon  
It will lead to fame,  
Fortune and freedom  
Just not for my country

So we fought in Italy, Russia  
Spain and San Domingo  
And in Canada and America  
At Chateauguay and Oswego  
Plattsburgh and Fort Erie

As corpses,  
Many of us floated down the Niagara River  
Or were laid to rest in a mass grave  
Under the “Pro Patria” column  
But not my “patria,” not my glory

Last summer,  
That monument was sad  
On that grey day, twigs and leaves underfoot  
And a smiling Tim Horton’s coffee cup  
On granite that no longer shone in the sun  
In Victoria Memorial Square in Toronto  
There stands a not quite-complete old soldier  
Representing those glorious 1812 regiments  
And as an almost-forgotten after thought  
“And the Wattsville Regiment [misspelt], Coloured Corps & Indians”

Everyone who played a part is dead and forgotten  
A few footnotes in unread histories  
No welcoming parades greeted the Poles of 1812  
This we have in common with the Poles of 1945  
That and the ongoing struggle for recognition



On what ships did we sail?  
What paths did we go down?  
Did we build homes and churches?  
What became of us?  
No one knows

All that remains of us  
A plaque in Perth, an island in the St. Lawrence  
And a Manitoba-shaped plaque  
In Bird's Hill Park,  
Near Selkirk, which even the park staff couldn't find

Yet our monument, our immortality  
Has been finally granted in these few staged words  
Out of a fading sense of patriotic duty,  
Of remembrance,  
Respect for our ever-present honourable ghosts

That and the recorded toasts after Oswego  
"What harmony, What coolness, What confidence"  
they said  
And at Fort Erie a young De Watteville re-enactor  
Who bravely defended our honour  
Two hundred years after the fact  
When challenged said with feeling:

"We charged Snake Hill five times!"





## Red River

The years go by  
And we live on in Manitoba  
Soldiers in peacetime  
There are fewer and fewer of us  
But oh! What Joy!  
When I meet an old brother-at-arms  
And we share tales  
Of battles and women  
Of forced marches  
And drunken brawls

The sad years go by  
And all that remains  
Are a handful of sad dreams  
In a foreign land  
The total treasure of a lone wanderer\*

Surrounded by the haunted face of surrender  
We few tired comrades  
Await the final defeat  
In the small sod huts of Manitoba

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\* This line is a loose translation from "Skarb Tułacza" from Mieczysław Haiman: *Herodit Polonii Poeta*, by Teresa Kaczorowska (Gryf, 2005), 14





## The Hospitality of Red River

Was I almost two hundred years too late?  
When I dropped in to visit him in his hut  
There, alone on the edge  
Of this community of foreigners  
In his place of refuge  
Not quite free, not quite equal  
Amid some hostility  
In his not-quite-hospitable  
Valley of perpetual peace  
In this wild, still common land

Welcome! / *Witam!*  
The wondrous cry of welcome  
The welcoming Other  
Exercising the right of one to visit  
This last J. Meron\*  
“He contributed to the needs of the saints,  
And practiced hospitality”\*\*

That “universal hospitality” that Kant suggested  
Was the basis for global cosmopolitan law  
For all people, for all time

We drank together and shared stories  
Felt like brothers, with a common bond  
And promised to meet again  
Sooner, rather than later

But when I waited far too long  
And returned 10 years later, he was gone  
And no one knew that he had been there  
He had deconstructed himself  
Written out of history and memory  
Deserted, he left for that universal state,  
Known as humankind  
The Citizenry of the hospitable  
Of a world yet to be realized

\* The last population census for the Red River Colony of 1849 lists the presence of one Polish family, J. Meron.

\*\* St. Paul, Letter to the Romans 12:13



Curious, that in this land of Isaac's  
A land of not-quite-perfect toleration  
Now stands the "Canadian Museum of Human  
Rights"  
And here I will seek my final place of asylum  
And my right to universal hospitality  
With Winnipeg as my "open city"  
A dwelling place  
Meron's final place of sanctuary



### **The Hawk Totem**

Hawks were powerful totems in the early days  
When totemic magic still held sway  
Now they are long gone.

Today we have hookers rampant  
On our coats-of-arms,  
And on shields wanting service

Today I killed a fly  
Sitting on my foot  
Languid in the rain





## The Final Victory of History

It's basic impressions that count  
It's not whether it is right or wrong  
Fact or fiction  
Or the credibility of the author's bias

Gordon Drummond and Pierre Berton\*  
Decide on the motley truth  
For all the Koloshinski's and Dąbrowski's  
And set it in historic stone for all times  
The received wisdom of historical traditions  
The history of contemporary prejudice

But the ultimate truth remains  
The attack on Fort Erie was a botched job  
Without flints, with ladders too short  
And the slaughter by guns that didn't sleep  
(Without the assumed element of surprise)  
And the river that pulled them to their Falls

The Poles were ever valiant, ever bold  
Five times they charged at Snake Hill  
Just as they charged those other hills  
At Fuengirola, Samosierra and San Domingo  
All those "ugly customers"

But there is one small, final victory  
Given in reply to the Sisyphusian task  
To those who challenge the received wisdom of tradition  
Spellcheck doesn't recognize that motley "Pierre Berton"  
So with the privilege of anger and sorrow  
It is never too late to amend history  
And look at 1812 anew

\* Gordon Drummond was the British commanding officer at Fort Erie and he blamed the 'foreigners' in the De Watteville Regiment for the failure of the attack. Pierre Berton is a well-known Canadian historian who described the De Wattevilles as a "motley foreign corps". It was their descriptions that angered and motivated me to write these poems.





## Poles in the War of 1812

“Once in his life a man must go to war”<sup>\*</sup>  
And we all know  
That every good Pole needs a good war  
And for them it was the War of 1812  
The Battle of Fort Erie

The Poles that charged the cannons on Snake Hill  
Were rooted in the courage of Polish gentry  
The bravery and honour of their tradition  
The true Pole is always the true gentleman

The internal loveliness  
And the character  
Of Polish *szlachta*  
Pure, poetic, romantic souls

The depth and joy of brilliantly coloured uniforms  
The uniforms of the grand Napoleon  
Vive L' Empereur!  
Even with barefoot realities and rags

Of confident men  
Who leaned into their foreign duties  
Duty-bound as uninvited guests  
Yet even valour when defeated  
Can do nothing but wring his hands<sup>\*\*</sup>

Scream it loud  
There were Poles at the Battle of Fort Erie  
Be proud that they fought well  
They came from a “far country”<sup>\*\*\*</sup>  
With that faith and hope  
Known only to Poles

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\* Ali and Nino, p. 63

\*\* See Adam Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz*, translated by Watson Kirkconnell (University of Toronto Press, 1962), p.2., line 38-39

\*\*\* Borrowed from Pope John Paul II's comments when introduced for the first time from the balcony at the Vatican



*Cześć ich pamięci!*

They are an expression of free history  
Don't emasculate history  
No need for squeamishness here  
Fight against the charge of obscurity  
Honour the courage  
Of those who charged up Snake Hill  
Without flints, snakes and ladders  
To bloody and watery deaths

Remember the men who were not free  
But acted with intense freedom and longing  
Far from everything they loved





## My “Psiakrew!” Moment\*

Psiarew!  
My little diatribe is almost over and does anyone care?  
How I wish that I could get through to you  
To get you to agree that this all matters  
To be angry with me and with history  
To show me that you care too!  
That I am not a lone Pole, not then, not now  
I want to hear a human response,  
A screaming pretence  
That this really does matter

**I can't face the greatest fear facing a poet  
INDIFFERENCE!  
And failure is never distant from a poet  
But, don't worry  
This is just the necessary defeatism  
Of the aspiring poet**

Am I still patriotic?  
In this least patriotic of all countries  
Yes, I think so  
Even though I have no world of my own  
I wonder what the old country is like  
Who knows?  
I can't remember a place I never lived in  
I just have glimpses of an imagined life  
The recollection of someone else's memories  
Their thoughts of how things used to be, back there

---

\* “Psiakrew” is a common curse in Polish. It translates as “Dog’s Blood”.



All my children will be Canadians, or Americans  
And be from places like Saskatchewan, or the  
Dakotas  
And all that will remain will be what I am  
But they will continue to ask me  
Are you Polish, Scottish or Canadian?  
And ignore my furious lament!

Nonetheless, that no one listens is significant;  
Absence speaks volumes, albeit quietly.





## I'm a Pole

*[Warning: This poem could be upsetting to some and that is the actual intention of the poet; all resemblances to real people and events is purely coincidental]*

I'm a Pole, without a Poland  
Now, there is a fate on which to meditate  
By a man of a faux land  
A forlorn destiny to perpetuate  
Passionate and tragic

I have that very uncomfortable feeling  
Of being double-parked  
In an ahistorical Canada,  
Or worse, in Polish half-being

“Damned Poles,”  
Endlessly argumentative, born to disagree  
Often I have had enough of you!  
What can I have in common with you?

We have no “Pans” here now  
Is that necessarily good or bad?  
A “Pan” whose traditions and code  
Have been trampled  
By the rash rush for modern life  
And the all-out stamping out  
By Stalinist regimes  
In the east and the west

Ridiculous hats  
Dances that could be featured in Stomp  
Impossible language, unsuitable names  
Quick to anger, and to cry  
Romantic and delusional

Why are Poles never number one?

\* “Pan” is the Polish word for “Mr.” or “Sir” and in some contexts it identifies a person of higher social status.



Ever since you stopped being Polish  
You love everything Polish  
Unlike true Poles  
Who love only the Polishness within  
But who can't agree about  
The list is too long to be specific

Why are there no Polish pickled  
cucumbers in my poems?  
I don't know,  
But, I am working on it.

I'm a Pole, without a Poland  
But over time you leave that space  
Gone and forgotten  
Become a Canadian, vanished  
No traces, no roots

And so I hunkered down  
To write some more poetry  
To preserve that which I am not!





## A Scotticism

One fine day, my demanding muse  
Challenged me, saying:  
“Where is your Scottish Poem?”  
Why all this Polishness?  
After all, your Grandfather  
Was a Scottish Soldier  
There was none Bolder  
You know you hide  
A Scottish soul  
And a Polish soul  
Beneath that Canadian skin

So I went in search  
Of my long-lost Scottish soul  
My own haggis, my own kipper  
My own black pudding  
But I couldn't find it  
It had been buried too long

And then I came across that old revered name  
Of that inventive Scot – Harry Lauder\*\*  
I searched for him on YouTube  
And there he was  
Still singing “Roamin in the gloamin’  
On the bonny banks o' Clyde”

The song seized me by the heart  
And dragged me back  
Through the mists of my time  
To the bedside of my dying Scottish mother  
I was holding her hand  
As she lay there crying  
For her long lost love and a different future  
Saying, “He left for South Africa,  
I never saw him again”  
She started to sing in a weakening voice

---

\* I must remember never to tell Anna that I also had a French Great, Great Grandmother. Who knows what challenges that might bring forth?

\*\* Sir Henry "Harry" Lauder was a Scottish music hall and vaudeville theatre singer and comedian remembered for entertaining the troops in WWI.



“Twas there that Annie Laurie<sup>\*\*\*</sup>  
Gi’ed me her promise true  
Gi’ed me her promise true  
Which ne’er forgot will be,  
And for bonnie Annie Laurie  
I’d lay me down and dee.”

And there lying, dying  
Was my ain “Annie Leckie”<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup>  
She was “a’ the world to me”  
Ma ain true Scottish mither  
And with a deep shudder  
My Scot’s soul rose frae the deid  
Skelloch’d tears in anguish  
Ma een watered  
Wi a’ the memories  
Of all the Scots, just like Poles  
“wandering on a foreign strand”<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup>  
Frae their ain and my ain native land  
And ma ain sweet hert within me burn’d  
For ma ain full right  
To a right gude-willie-waught,  
To Scotland the Brave!

Sae, wad ye listen my pointed muse  
There was great pain and hurt it  
In bringing a Scottish soul  
Back to a guid life  
To remember that “land of my sires”  
Of auld lang syne  
But noo that you have made me do it  
I hae gi’ed my promise true  
That my own Scottish soul  
Which ne’er forgot will be  
Now it has been freed  
Until “I lay me down and dee”

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<sup>\*\*\*</sup> “Annie Laurie” is an old Scottish song based on a poem by William Douglas (1672?–1748) of Dumfries and Galloway.

<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> Anne Pryde Leckie (1920–1971) was my Mother’s maiden name; She was born in Bonnyrigg, Scotland

<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> Several phrases in this last section are borrowed from Sir Walter Scott, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* and Robert Burns, *Auld Lang Syne*.



### **Concluding Note**

**And I was not there among the men  
Mead and wine I did not drink  
And what I imagined and what I dreamt  
I have creatively recorded here**

**And No! I have not surrendered!**

## **Stan Skrzyszewski - Author's Note:**

I want to make this as clear as I can. I am a Canadian and I have lived my life and earned my living as a Canadian. I am married to a Canadian and my children are Canadian. My ethnic background is a split between Polish (Father) and Scottish (Mother). Between my Mother and Father I had a very active conversational life. At the dinner table the conversation would range from Polish to Scottish history, to politics and culture and beyond. As a result I am well-versed in Polish, Scottish and European history and culture. Of course, I have a very Polish last name, Skrzyszewski, which identifies me instantly as being of Polish descent, and I am very proud of that last name. But, I am also a totally acculturated Canadian. I cannot claim to have had the stereo-typical Eastern-European, immigrant experience of an uncertain identity, or wanting to overcome an identity.

At university I earned degrees in English literature, philosophy and library science. I have always had a literary bent and I often read poetry and puzzle over philosophical and historical issues. I can also read in English, Polish and have a fair comprehension of the Scottish, although not the Gaelic.

During my working life, first as a librarian and then as a management consultant, I had very little to do with the Polish community in Canada. It was not because of any falling out or argument that I was not involved with the Polish Community, I just wasn't; I wasn't that interested. When I retired I made one promise to myself and that was that whatever I undertook in this phase of my life, it had to be creative. After a lifetime as a bureaucrat I wanted to try my hand at being creative.

One day after I had retired, I ran into an old friend of my Father's, a Polish Veteran of World War II. He told me that the local branch of the Royal Canadian Legion (Polish Veterans) was in need of support and needed younger members. Since my Father was actively involved in the Legion (he had served as President) I joined and started to attend Legion meetings. I was shocked to see how few

Polish veterans were left and how little had been done within Canadian society to memorialize these brave men.

About this time, Andrzej Wajda, the famous Polish film director, released his film "Katyń" which dealt with the massacre of Polish Officers, prisoners of war, by the Soviets in 1940. The thought of "Katyń" woke something within me. It also made me think of my Grandfather, another Stanisław Skrzyszewski, who was arrested by the Soviets in 1940 and was never seen again. My first creative act involved the writing of a series of poems memorializing Katyń and my Grandfather. The result of this effort was my first book of poems, "Therefore, We Must Remember: The Katyn Poetry and Song Cycle." It was followed by a CD which included a recording of the poems and a series of songs written by some musician friends.

So it seems that at this stage of my life I have morphed into a writer who in addition to many other interests is dedicated to bringing to consciousness some of the forgotten memories of Poles in Canada, especially Polish Veterans who found their place of exile in Canada, a Canada they grew to love and cherish. I come by this interest honestly. My Father, Stanisław Skrzyszewski, was a Polish Veteran who settled in Canada in 1948 and lived here like many Polish Veterans who have settled in Canada, going back to the time of the first Polish Veterans of the War of 1812. Stanisław Skrzyszewski served with the Polish forces in Poland in September 1939, in France in 1940, in England and Scotland in 1941, in the Middle East from June 1942 to 1943, and finally in Italy in 1944, until he was seriously wounded at the Battle of Monte Cassino.

I was raised on stories of the exploits of my Father and my Grandfather in earlier wars. I also became very aware of the often incredible and poignant stories of Polish Veterans who fought on many fronts, for many causes and in many wars to then be largely forgotten. It is this lack of memory that has motivated me to write histories and poetry aimed at creating a written memorial to the Polish Veterans who have lived in Canada over the past 200 years.

Within me also rests a Scottish soul - given that my Mother was a staunch Scottish Presbyterian, born in Bonnyrigg, Scotland and that my Grandfather George Leckie (whom I never met) also served in the British army in the First World War. Therefore you will find a

slight glimmer of Scottishness in these poems, especially in the final poem, "A Scotticism."

I live in London, Ontario, and I have published numerous articles, as well as, *"The Knowledge Entrepreneur," "Therefore, We Must Remember: The Katyń Poetry and Song Cycle" (book and CD), "Whistler Poems,"* and *"The Daily Life of Polish Soldiers, Camp Niagara, 1917-1919."*

