

In 23

Ellison Robertson



Line Up — 24" x 18" — w/c: matches on paper — 1981

Introduction: making history

...as E.P. Thompson writes, it is never safe to assume that any of our history is altogether dead. It tends to accumulate as a form of “stored cultural energy,” and from time to time moments of cultural transmission and illumination take place.¹

All of the paintings reproduced here, as well as the story, were done between the late '70s and mid '80s when my work focused almost exclusively on aspects of working-class life and labour history in Cape Breton. In trying to introduce them I've found myself indulging in autobiography, a habit common among artists who aren't easily reconciled to their artistic offspring making their way undefended out in the world. What I hope I've done is rather to present the context in which my work took its minor place within a particular and much wider moment of left history.

I was born in Sydney, Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. By 1966, when at the age of eighteen I left to go to art school in Halifax, I had also lived in almost all of the surrounding coal mining towns. Like water to the fish and air to the birds, the experience of growing up in these working-class communities was the medium that transparently shaped my consciousness. It is clear enough in memory that my senses never completely denied the legacy of exploitation, struggle and poverty that had constructed these experiences, but as a child it may seem possible to exist outside of history, both your own and all the other histories in which it seems you never were anyway. Still the material limitations were obvious — and escape was a constantly reiterated theme among those of my parents' and grandparents' generations — but in a realm of kinship, oral versatility and humour the imagination seemed, in contrast, boundless.

¹ David Frank, “Class Conflict in the Coal Industry Cape Breton, 1922,” in L. Sefton-MacDowell and I. Radforth (eds.), *Canadian Working Class History* (Toronto 1990), 477.

For those who'd grown up through the labour wars of the '20s and '30s depression, who came to maturity during World War II and struggled in the following decades to stay in Cape Breton despite the protracted failing of the coal and steel industries, education was often readily seen as one of the "high roads" out for their children. It offered a way around the impasse of their history of honourable defeats, that history of which, as I left, I knew little more than the occasional anecdotes of depression-bred ingenuity, of military exploits or harsh pit town humour. But then — an experience that was hardly mine alone nor even unique to Cape Bretoners — I quickly came to a realization of a sense of my solidarity and attachment to a particular "place" in the world, simply by leaving it behind. In part this meant that, while I eagerly absorbed the given history and practices of "mainstream" culture (to which, as it was made plain to each of us from the Atlantic region, I brought a marginal and culturally "deprived" range of experience), I found I remained most susceptible to works that reflected a social consciousness of their role in shaping the sense of a specific place and community. (This innocent interest was generally discouraged and I had no grasp of any of the language of the left — not even a notion of the clearly useful term class — which might have framed a better resistance than I could muster. Even John Berger still lay in my future.) Then came the heyday of conceptual art in which the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design was the Canadian beachhead for the mostly American and European proponents of this movement. It was all very exciting, though the embrace of these challenging ideas about art usually meant repudiating painting and all other "traditional" art forms; the tail of modernism had turned to wagging the dog. For a while I took to producing a sort of conceptual mannerism (just as absurd as it sounds) and then to making video and photographic works which were mostly taken, often indignantly, by fellow conceptual converts as satires of my serious minded betters. At a personal impasse (in itself a frequent experience in the attempted transition from student to mature "artist") I despaired for several years of making any visual art and turned to a secondary interest in writing.

Returning to Cape Breton in 1975 for what was to be only a summer long visit at least two significant factors effected a change in my grim view of the possibility of my producing any visual works. First, in the excitement of building a modest house in the country and at a remove from my disaffecting experience of the "art scene," I found myself alive again to the visual interest in art history and my surroundings that had sent me off to art school in the first place. I began painting with a delight in my freedom from the constraints of judging their significance and a pleasure at simply employing a skill I'd so arduously acquired and, it seemed, so casually dismissed. And secondly, I met a number of people who had also gone away in the mid '60s to school and work and had returned with a range of intentions but with a common focus

(much greater than my own) of appreciation for the Cape Breton community and an interest in effecting positive social change. This emerged in part from the wider legacy of '60s and '70s activism but was also consciously founded on a sense of the particular radical history of Cape Breton's working-class communities. It was then I met Donald MacGillivray who had returned to research and to teach labour and social history at the College of Cape Breton. Through Don I met other historians such as David Frank and Del Muisse and, most significantly for my work, many individuals such as the Cape Breton labour activist George MacEachern whose memories spanned most of the century. While my reading and conversations with the former introduced me to the island's radical past, it was in the accounts of the lived experiences of men and women such as George that I most vividly perceived their collective history as the ground for so much of my own.

I set down the scenes I imagined with the deliberate intention of representing aspects of this history which had been neglected and even denied such representations. It was an absence I hoped to make visible. The paintings were always meant to complement the historical investigations of my friends and to acknowledge and celebrate the "extraordinary" events in these "ordinary" lives, and never simply as "illustrations" or "aesthetic nostalgia." It was gratifying to feel myself "a fortunate man" as my experience, my skills, my working subject, and my audience seemed joined in opening a space for the shared renewal of an oppositional history. I worked with a directness and enthusiasm but never without an awareness of the limits and difficulties of the project. It went against the grain of both contemporary cultural "common sense" and the (often self-congratulating) methods of "advanced" art production, and ultimately I didn't (perhaps couldn't) attempt to resolve such issues in the paintings, finding instead that in certain ways they were displaced for me to the practice of writing fiction. But what mattered then and still matters most to me about the paintings was the possibility that they might play even a small role as "stored cultural energy" in the presentation and repossession of our history.



Rally — 29" x 40" — w/c: matches on canvas — 1985



Waterford Lake — 22" x 33" — w/c: pastel on paper — 1984

In 23*

A young man walked away from the disastrous scene of the charge, turning his back on the disorganized group of horsemen, the screaming men and women who rushed everywhere, getting nowhere in the deep shaded dark of late evening as it descended on the street.

The young man, broad shouldered, of medium height, dressed in a clean, faded blue suit, the shoulder and knees torn and muddied, walked on as if this battle meant nothing to him. Yet he had been in the middle of it a few minutes ago. He had killed a man back there.

He walked on down the centre of the street passing a few people who paid him no attention, they were so intent on getting to the scene of the excitement. A few of them would get their heads cracked, as many already had. A nine-year-old boy had been crushed, was barely alive. A thirty-year-old woman had miscarried. A man had a heart attack after one of the Provincial Police had ridden his horse into this man's hotel, shouting obscenities, creating a trail of wreckage. And one man was shot dead, shot in the chest with an old service revolver taken from a policeman who had been pulled from his horse during the charge.

The dead man had been tall, over six feet, broad and heavy, his head balding, the fringe of once red hair a fading ginger, though a thick drooping mustache was still dark — but the red of the mustache was not red against the blood dribbling from the corner of the mouth. The man's hands were clean, slightly soft now but thick, flattened, the joints enlarged by heavy labour. The good suit, the clean white shirt front, contrasted with the broad heavy features outlined by the permanent tattoo of coal dust; though even that was somewhat faded in the softening of his flesh. The face had relaxed in death as if this sudden shocking end was only to be expected.

* * *

The young man left the street where the houses became more scattered. He walked carelessly across the dark fields, oblivious to the smell of new grass and wild flowers, blind to the panicked flight of small birds nesting near the ground. The fields seemed black while the sky darkened to a colourless depth edged by the last red glow of vanished sun. He ran occasionally now, finding some thoughtless comfort in the heat which gripped him, in the heat of heavy sweating muscles, in the pain which grew in his side.

* *In 23* first appeared in *Cranberry Head: Stories and Paintings* (Sydney, N.S.: U.C.C.B. Press. 1985)

He became slowly aware of having fallen. He was lying on his back staring at the sky which was lightening with the approach of a rising moon. He sat up slowly, his body aching, his legs dangling across the low stone wall over which he'd tripped. His mouth was sour as if he'd been sick. He sat on the wall and saw that all his running had brought him to the crest of a hill overlooking the street he'd fled. The street lamps were on and the spotlights set up by the army on the perimeter of the plant played up and down those few blocks. The streets seemed deserted from this distance. There was no sound but the faint hum of the trams, moving as if nothing had occurred to alter the inertia of a summer Sunday. Nothing moved. No one was down there. But no, there was one man down there, he thought, Patrick Allan Carmichael is there. What he had driven from his mind as he'd hurried away came back starkly. He saw the man thrust away from him, saw the blood staining the shirt front, saw the flash from the gun, blue in the darkening, the man falling back down the wall, the blood marking the wall above where the man sat wedged between the wall and a pony cart, the man dead.

He couldn't remember the sensation of the gun fired, only the aftermath, as if everything before was unreal. The gun, he remembered with sudden terror, the gun was in his pocket. He pulled it out. It seemed to absorb the faint light there was from the rising moon. He could smell the oil and metal. He began trembling and dropped the gun, holding his head in his hands as he sobbed. Emptied of that he looked again at the distant streets empty of their spectacle that had flowed around and through him. He thought he should hide the gun and looked around carefully before he tucked it beneath a break in the wall.

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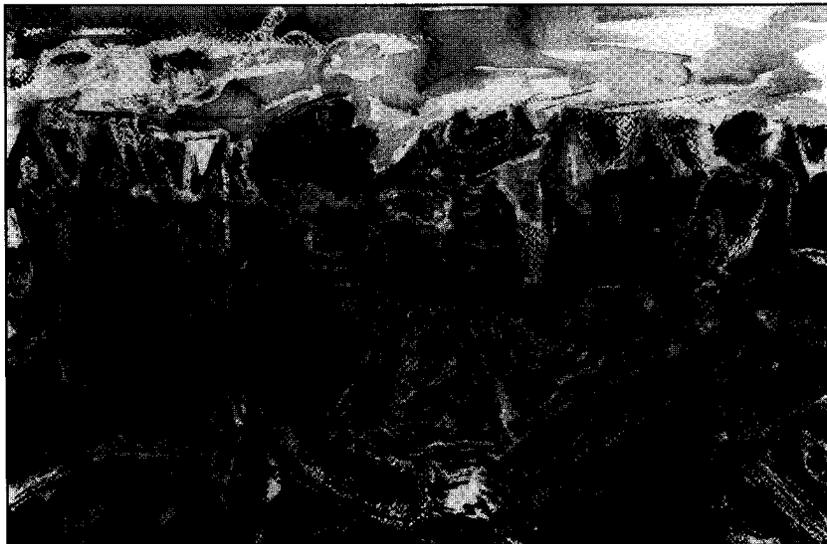
—I say good in the long run. — A small round shouldered man was speaking, stabbing his left palm with the index finger, the only finger, on his right hand. — After what happened we better act fast...the international never sent him up here for anything but to poke around in our affairs. —

The hall was crowded, the air blue with smoke and curses flung from nervous, excited mouths. It looked as if a big meeting were beginning but it was only 7:30 this Monday morning and none of the executive were to be seen. A second man, tall and fat, stood in the doorway listening to the first but shaking his head all the while. — He had a reputation at one time for straight talk, you're listening to rumour. He was a trouble shooter for Blanding and the rest of the leadership but he's been at this for a long time. We could have used him.—

— It won't be any one man gets us through this. This is open bloody war.
— The small man leaned slightly toward the open door and spat prodigiously into the dirt walk. — Heads up. — The little man laughed. He grasped Joe's sleeve with his clawlike thumb and forefinger. Here, Jim is looking for you. Spent the night in an alley did you? You and Carmichael, eh?—

Cakie was looking at Joe's dirty clothes but the mention of the dead man and the alley startled Joe, as if he might have come in here to find everything going on without that...Did someone see it all? Before he could back out more men pushed in from the street, a number of them brandishing newspapers. The little man, who was Cakie MacPhee, grabbed a paper and thrust it at Joe.— Here, Jim is in the office waiting for this.—

A man climbed onto a chair and began reading aloud the report of the police charge the night before. — ROUTINE police patrol near company property (The fucking main road, someone yelled) met with UNPROVOKED ... (The reader hollered out all the more incensing words and the crowd of men reacted in anger and frustration as it became clear there was going to be no mention of the brutality of the police, the nature of their charge down a busy street filled with ordinary citizens...churchgoers on their way home, children and women. And no mention of the injured. Jim McNulty had issued a press release immediately after the attack. He had been an eye witness, but there was no mention made of this)...The mayor regretting, despite HIS SYMPATHY...with the strikers, they have gone too far in assaulting a policeman who has been hospitalized and is in critical condition....—



Liquid Courage — 15" x 22" — W/C: pastel on paper — 1983



Dialectics — 30" x 36" — oil on canvas — 1983

Joe had moved through the men to the front of the hall. His thoughts remained confused. All night he had gone over the events that led to the shooting. Again and again he'd told himself, as if it were one side in an argument, "It was an accident." He had been walking without any special destination, vaguely hoping to meet Elizabeth MacFarlane coming from church, when people had begun to turn, to stare down the long broad road in the direction of an unfamiliar noise. At the end of the street a group of mounted men appeared in a ragged knot galloping down the centre of the street. The noise was the drum of pounding hooves and the shouts and curses of the men. They weren't regular police but a special group of Provincial Police deputized during the strike from among the ranks of the water-front gangs in the capital.

There was no time to consider any reaction before they were pouring into the most crowded blocks on the street. Some of the 'policemen' were clearly so drunk they could barely stay mounted, but all brandished clubs or long sticks. They battered heads and backs, careless of what damage was done to whom, and many men and women were struck down while others fell in their panicked running and were caught under the passing horses. At the height of

this terrible scene Joe thought he was witnessing the murder of the entire population. He saw riders urging their mounts into stores and houses from whence crashes offered news of the damage they did and increased the panic on the street. Joe felt paralyzed. But what could anyone do. Then a rider came near the doorway, where Joe instinctively crouched, and swung his billy club at a woman who stood motionless, dumbfounded by terror before this onslaught. The man was so drunk he lost his balance and half slipped from the saddle. Joe leapt up and grabbed the man's club wielding arm, but the fellow held to the saddle while the horse shied away. Joe held tight, but without a foothold he fell to one knee. This brought the bellowing policeman off the horse, though one foot remained hooked in a stirrup and the panicked horse jerked spasmodically, dragging the two struggling men into the gutter. A half dozen people gathered, trying to hold the horse until they'd freed the man, only to dump him on the pavement where kicks and punches rained upon him. He managed to get one hand on a pistol tucked into a boot, but Joe saw this and wrenched it from the man as he fought to pull it out. In the struggle no one noticed as several other mounted policemen rode up swinging their deadly hardwood clubs. Everyone scattered, leaving the fallen cop moaning in the dirt.

Joe had run into an alleyway, but a rider plunged after him, his stirrups rattling along the two walls of the narrow passage. Joe made it into the yard and hid behind a shed, the pistol clutched in his hand. He knew very little about guns, except for an ancient shotgun he'd hunted birds with, and this desperate chase seemed so close to the child's games of four or five years before, played in these same sort of dirt yards, he felt he might laugh aloud as the man on the huge horse passed an arm's length away, turned and went back down the alley. Joe looked in amazement at the gun clutched in his taut, whitening fingers. He hadn't even placed a finger on the trigger. He did so then in a half conscious state of adrenalin-induced euphoria. He crept silently through several yards before starting along another shadowed alley, drawn back to the street, though he counselled himself to get the hell out of there. The light from the street shone part way along the passage, casting great exaggerated shadows. The sound continued as before but nothing moved in the brief section of street he spied upon. He moved past an outside stairway and spun round at a noise, imagining the great bulk of a horse towering over him. A shape loomed before him. Now he remembers his arm had already lifted, the gun was in his hand but the arm lifted solely to ward off whatever his fear had conjured. A man had risen up before him. The gun fired and the man went crashing back over the bottom steps, against the wall, where he slid to the ground as easily as if he'd stumbled in drunkenness. But his eyes were open and looking past Joe, who almost turned to follow the man's gaze, so intent did it seem. Joe recognized the man, Patrick Allan Carmichael, had met him at

the station with Jim, had carried the man's bag to the hotel and had shaken the big hand that lay across the blood stained shirt. What if it had been a stranger? What had the difference been? He wasn't sure, but something about knowing who the man was made him walk away. Someone should have heard the shot and the police should have come and taken him away and questioned him and lawyers should have come and priests and whatever happened when you killed someone. But no one heard anything over the racket in the street. He'd been alone. He'd felt for a pulse and there'd been none and he'd walked away from the alley and walked up the street away from the chaotic scene of the charge and walked ...walked and walked...

— Where the hell have you been? — Jim seized the paper and read for a moment — The blood suckers, trust them to make a profit even out of a man's death. —

Jim McNulty held the paper close to his weak eyes while his large nose seemed to scan line after line as someone else might with a finger. He'd skimmed through the main story grunting occasionally and shaking his head at what was no more than he'd expected, then he looked for the smaller item and slammed the desk in disgust as he read out loud. — The bastards...listen to this Joe. Patrick Allan Carmichael, the NOTORIOUS union organizer recently arrived in our city, was found last evening outside the premises of an infamous house of ill repute in the North End...Mr. Carmichael apparently suffered a heart attack...— He read on to the end but Joe hardly heard him. Under his wide dark brows Joe's eyes drew together in bafflement. His hand pulled a chair nearer and he sat down slowly, unaware that he was doing so. His eyes flickered over the small room he'd become so familiar with, but nothing held his attention except the drawn face of Jim McNulty whose weak eyes, watching him, were perceptive enough when measuring a man and his reactions, "He'll size you up quick enough," Joe's father had said as he brought him to the union hall, "No need to flatter you or lie to him." That was a year ago. Joe had worked at the plant over a year now and he'd worked for the union under the guidance of his father's old friend and comrade; worked almost as long hours in this cramped room with its two undersized roll-topped desks and overflowing, battered, file cabinets, as he had in the vast, complicated, horror of the steel plant. He'd run errands, learned to type on the eccentric old Underwood and been privy to all the workings of the union, to experience beyond his own. And frequently he'd heard stories of his father who'd been a main stay of the miners' union before the war, stories of the man he'd been before he lost a leg in the trenches and turned into the lonely bitter recluse of the last few years, spurning all talk of unions and labour as he violently spurned all pity but his own.

McNulty threw the paper on the floor. — Well Joe the boozewah lunk heads will eat that up...Notorious union organizer in a whore house. I see you're shocked too. Well I'm surprised myself...I didn't think Carmichael could get it up anymore for anything but money. That's right Joe. A crook. A crook in the union. And you know how I know he was a crook? He worked for the biggest crook of all, the great Mr. Blanding himself...Come on Joe, even at nineteen you're not that much of a romantic, not with your old man...—

—He was shot.— Joe's voice was hollow, rising like a bubble from his open mouth, breaking in the air with a weak plop...(Carmichael's last breath came in a bubble to his lips and broke in a dribble of red drool...)

—Heart attack, Joe. —Jim McNulty kicked the paper over so the front page showed; the headline; STRIKERS RIOT; the smaller heading farther down the page: UNION ORGANIZER SUFFERS HEART ATTACK. McNulty's quizzical face fixed on the pale confused face of the boy.

—He was shot...Carmichael was shot.—

McNulty got up and closed the door. — Do you know what you're saying?—

—I...I saw him die (tell him... tell him), I...He was shot...— Joe let out a moan, — Jim, they shot him. — It was suddenly so true. Joe closed his eyes, but the other image remained: his arm rising, the gun firing. Carmichael falling. But them shooting him...it seemed true too, the drumming of the horses hooves, faces drunken, twisted by hate, shouting...the swinging clubs, faces erupting blood and pain, the fallen calling out hopelessly...the flashing darkness of mounted men swirling in the long sunset shadows of the workers' houses...Their violence was real enough and intentional.

As Joe told the story he created a second image of Carmichael's death which contradicted the first.

— Why didn't you get hold of me or Johnnie? Someone? Jim asked but he wasn't listening for an answer. He was sitting at his desk writing quickly.

— They chased me, I hid behind a shed and then, then in a field...— He told him Carmichael had been shot during the police attack. It wasn't in the North End at all.

—What! — McNulty had burst into laughter.

—Carmichael leapt into the street to grab one of them right off the horse...—

McNulty raised his eyebrows, went on writing.

—People joined him...The man was dragged out of the saddle...He had a gun. I bet they all did. —Joe was fascinated by his own story, but that, wasn't that too close to something which had happened?

—And you were there? For the whole incident? — McNulty's pen was lifted slightly from the paper, tensed, ready to weave its violent, elegant spell.

—More of them rode up... the cop was down...people kicking and kicking him...we ran and they chased Mr. Carmichael into an alley...I was hiding...I was there... and they shot...shot, he never...never had a chance...— Joe watched the pen moving now in loop and stroke, line after line, his attention fixed on what he guessed were his words, prompted by his words, and he knew the possible steps of quick revision, of typing, and the carrying of the few neat pages to the printer who would set the words in various bold type faces and run the press which hypnotically dispensed sheets of dull buff paper glistening with wet black words; the reality of those words already standing apart from what they supposedly described.



The Crowd — 15" x 22" — w.c./pastel — 1984

Even while he talked Joe's thoughts strayed. He felt again the surge of excitement as the train pulled into the station two days ago and the big, red-headed man in the dark suit appeared in the door of the car, squinting against the brilliant afternoon sun, scanning quietly the troop train on the adjacent track, the sparse crowd on the platform and the young soldiers in neat, clean battle dress. Joe felt only scorn now for his excitement, his anticipation of his hero and he felt shame as he thought of blurting those feelings out in front of Elizabeth, thought of her shy nodding response to his impassioned words, the words borrowed with the stories of the man's exploits.

He had walked to exhaustion in the moonlight, avoiding roads and houses, meeting no one, and had slept a few hours by a stream where he'd stopped to drink. He woke to the sunrise and walked on stiffly, aware now of his torn suit and dirty hands. He'd washed in the cold clear brook and headed for the boarding house, but some unexamined fear kept him from entering the comfortable hall, climbing to his small attic room where he could change. Absurdly he regretted not being able to go to work, to bury himself with that routine, as if he'd completely forgotten the strike. He couldn't bear to meet anyone in the house and yet he desperately wanted to see Elizabeth, the daughter of his landlady. He waited in the coal shed, ridiculously vulnerable to discovery but oblivious to anything but his desperation. Finally she stepped into the yard to empty a basin into the open drain. She paused, wiping a small white hand on her faded blue apron, and turned her face to the first sun slanting across rooftops, through motionless leaves, to this small, swept patch of dirt. She tucked a wisp of hair back in place before turning again to the house. The roseate light gave her hair a gingerish cast which made Joe sink back in misery. He sat sobbing until, like the child he had been only a few years before, he felt the cause of all this washed from him, leaving only the vague conviction that he must confess to someone. And instinct told him it must not be to another innocent so he had come only half consciously seeking from McNulty the exoneration he had for years ceased to desire from the church; and McNulty had, in his own ingrained knowledge and experience of the falsity of owners, managers, police, city fathers and their handmaidens in the press, accepted at once the truth of whatever would contradict that network of manipulation and lies.

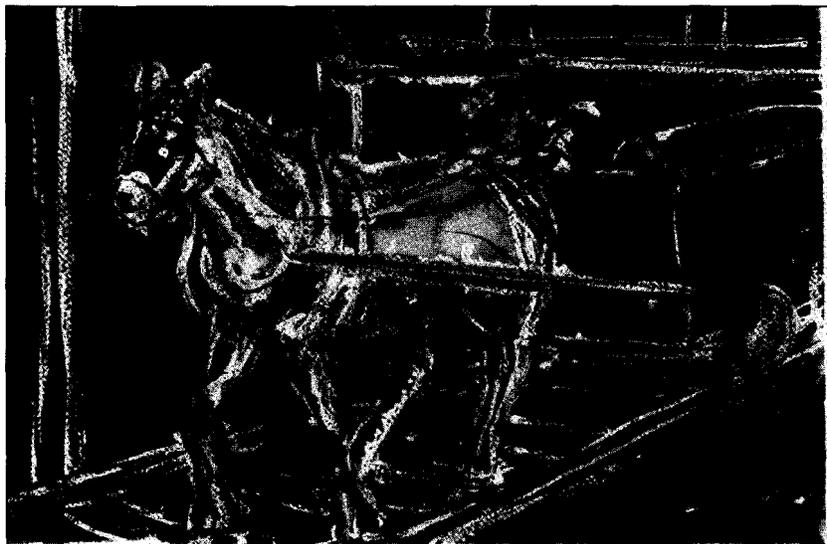
— And exactly where...?—

Joe described the alley, the green house on one side, the clothing store on the other, the outside stairs...even the pony cart. And McNulty burst into bitter laughter. — The one thing they didn't falsify Joe, upstairs in the green house, there is a whore house.

Clutching the several sheets of paper he had just written on, McNulty threw open the office door and shouted into the haze of cigarette smoke which rolled into the room— Walecki, Arch MacDonald...Cakie — Then leaving the door slightly ajar he turned back to Joe. — It's a terrible thing but I'm just thankful you were there.—

I was there. It was a phrase with which Joe's father silenced so many protestations. Joe looked about the room with the queer sense of his father watching him. And there was something undefined in the various faces of these eager men, hurrying into the overcrowded office, which his father shared, a light, a fire that had been in his father's eyes even when he was repudiating the goals he'd once held in common with these steel workers and the miners alongside of whom he'd worked.

Joe remembered some months ago, as his eager untutored reading had found guidance from McNulty, he'd begun to recognize names and titles which he'd seen at home on the books his father kept stored in boxes in the pantry. He had gone searching there one Sunday, setting aside the books he had heard about and those with certain promising words in the title: Socialist...Proletarian ...Analysis...Marxist... He hadn't noticed his father until he grunted in the vaguely mocking way he had. The man was in his undershirt and trousers, supporting himself on his one leg, gripping the door-frame, his right pant leg hanging, empty, the artificial leg somewhere upstairs. — So you've picked up the religion...Go ahead, take them...I've had all the harm that's in them. — He'd turned away leaving only the receding heavy thump of his hopping progress.



Pit Pony No. 2 — 15" x 22" — W/C: pastel on paper — 1983

Why had he gone overseas when he was exempted as a miner? Joe never had the courage to ask and his father never spoke directly of any of his experiences...of the lost leg... — I was there. — And only silence could answer. Or rage.

The men showed the strain of the past weeks and the battles of the weekend. MacPhee had just gotten out of the hospital after recovering from a beating by company goons the week before. Johnny Walecki and Arch Macdonald had both been with the men who had stopped work Friday morning and had had to fight their way out of the plant. There were hundreds of company supporters within the plant who were paid for their loyalty and supplied with the steel bars they carried as perpetual threat to all dissenting opinion. There were nearly a thousand of the monkey-suited Provincial Police in the area. A group of these had carried out the attack Saturday on the men picketing the coke ovens and barring entry. Clubs, chains and the same iron bars had routed the weary men; Walecki's head was bandaged, the dull ache allowing no forgetting of the incident. The company was adamant in refusing recognition of the union or even the least of their demands. The anticipation of Carmichael's arrival held hope for many but as if to mock this solitary enforcement, the troop train had rolled into the city, just ahead of the passenger train, sand bagged flatcars and machine guns underlining the arrival of several hundred, bright faced, heavily armed, young men. The point was made and the provincial police thugs were free to do what none of the established forces wanted the blame for.

But Sunday. The men all thought the company had made a mistake in going so far; women had been beaten, children weren't safe, men had been jailed for protecting their homes. — But, it was observed, they can't lock us all up! —All of them felt a galvanic rush of anger.

There was silence after McNulty told Joe's story of the shooting, then the slow realization of what it meant, the slight advantage it might offer them if they could prove the collusion which must have taken place between the police, the company the coroner, the press, and who knew who else, to cover up the murder of one of their number by the police.

—Word has spread since last night...all over the island. There's a meeting today in the Bay. The miners are ready to strike in sympathy. Everyone's outraged at yesterday's events. If we can prove they've killed Carmichael...—

McNulty left it in the air.

—How can we? They've got spies everywhere, we can hardly move...even they have the ministers spying that we meet such and such and so many — Johnny Walecki struck his palm, — They've got search lights and...—



July 1/1923, Bloody Sunday — 18" x 24" — acrylic

—He's right Jim. The rumour is too that they'll read the riot act. We won't be able to meet...no more than two or three at a time. —

—We don't have to prove they killed him. — Cakie grinned, his face assuming the naturally insolent caste which earned him so much abuse whenever it was turned upon any authority. The others looked at him, Arch MacDonald grinning in expectation of whatever the little man would come out with. — We only have to prove he was shot. That makes them all liars and the good citizens can figure out the rest.—

McNulty nodded, slowly looking from one to the next, including Joe in this elite circle — He's right, yes. It's not the battle, but if we can make them look foolish it's all to the good. —

An idea slowly blossomed on Arch's fat face...— Carmichael is a martyr...—

—He may be. He just may be. —McNulty acknowledged with his faint bitter smile.

* * *

The four of them were pressed together as if they expected the door would require an assault of combined strength but Arch turned the door knob and the door swung away with its own momentum, smacking against the wall, revealing a wide dim lit corridor lined by doors Arch grabbed at the door in a fright and seemed about to close it. Johnny and Joe leapt back but McNulty pushed through the narrow space between Arch and the stone doorway so the others stepped in behind him. Mouths were dry, hearts beat sombrely, echoed by their hesitant footsteps. They began to open doors.

— You shouldn't be in here. — A tall thin man had stepped round the corner at the corridor's end. He was stroking the front of his long green apron. He was wrapped in it from his knees to the top of his chest and the light directly over his head gave a bird-like cast to his gaunt face. Joe burst out laughing. The men looked at him reprovingly.

— We're looking for a friend. — McNulty stepped forward, hand extended casually. The man smiled uneasily but took the proffered hand in an automatic, professional way. McNulty gripped it firmly pulling the man slightly off balance.

— We'd appreciate your help. Our friend is Patrick Allan Carmichael. —

The man flinched, shook his head, opening his mouth as if calling out would be an agony.

— We're alone aren't we? —

The man hesitated, nodded yes. Away from the exaggerated shadows of the overhead light his face seemed to piece itself together. He looked like his brother, the mayor, but it was a comic resemblance to the mayor's fat, lined face. The man looked fearful when asked again where Carmichael was, but he closed his mouth firmly, saying nothing.

McNulty told the man to stay with Arch who tied and gagged him. Arch and Johnny were giggling now as if they were at some game and it was Joe who shared McNulty's solemn attitude. Joe could hardly believe he was here, his mind still out somewhere between the hot closeness of the office and the breezy dark of the poorly lit back streets they followed to get here. It was Walecki who suggested the body would logically be taken to the funeral parlour of the mayor's brother. — He won't miss to make a buck.— And now they moved furtively along the silent corridor, opening doors with tense abruptness, turning on lights to find over and over a similar empty room with a rough trestle table, and a larger room with a stack of ready made coffins, the fancy polished creations which were coming into fashion with the middle class.



Get His F-ing cap — 22" x 36" — w/c: pastel on paper — 1985

They were still elbow to elbow even though their nervousness was receding. McNulty stopped abruptly and Johnny collided with him.

—Damn, we're acting like foolish lads. Go along to the end Johnny, Joe you take one side, I'll have the other — With an impatient gesture he indicated the length of hallway they'd turned into. Johnny went along to the end where a glass paneled door opened to a brightly lit room. He stepped inside and yelled, — Mother of God. — McNulty held Joe back with a hand on his chest, — Keep looking Joe. — and hurried to the end of the hall. He disappeared into the room behind Johnny.

Joe continued opening doors, almost enjoying the novelty of flicking the switches to flood the rooms with electric light. The boarding house still had gas lamps and at home they'd only kerosene. But the electricity seemed suddenly a continuation of the lighting in the plant and he thought apprehensively, What if we were caught? The idea seemed to awaken something in him that was more than nervousness and he seemed to be trying to remember something as he went over the day's events, the interminable waiting in the

confinement of the office, listening to the meetings, the speeches and planning in the hall, as Cakie and Jim spoke of what must be done, without any reference to Joe or Carmichael's shooting, while within the office there was talk of nothing else. Finally he had a sense of looking at a far off figure as he imagined himself sitting in the coal shed, imagined it as if he looked at someone else and asked in callous perplexity, — What is wrong with him? —

He closed the final door and faced the open door at the end. Stepping inside he saw what had made Johnny call out. A woman lay on a sort of table of metal topped by a marble slab which had a veined whiteness almost identical to the naked flesh of the dead old woman; beyond her another of these tables held a young boy. The air was rank with a chemical odour which had been present in the hallway with the slight association of a doctor's infirmary and here grabbed at the throat and made the eyes water, squeezing tears. At the far end of the room Johnny and McNulty were standing over another table. A body lay there as well, but it had been covered by a rubber sheet, which Johnny was holding up so the figure was half uncovered.

— Just luck they were so careless of anyone knowing the truth. — McNulty was saying.

— Jesus Jesus Jesus... — Johnny kept intoning without a trace of religiosity.

— He's drained the blood but the wound hasn't been touched, — McNulty was speaking softly. At the mention of blood Johnny stepped to a nearby sink to vomit. The Rubber sheet slipped off the corpse and fell to the floor.

Joe had approached in a dreamy state of extended time. He heard them normally, but his own movements had a heavy clumsy slowness as he felt his hand touching the cold marble tables for support, oblivious of the bodies he passed and solely, fearfully conscious of the unseen body he was approaching. He stopped at the head of the table and looked down at Carmichael's face, so white, and slightly bloated as if the man were in a drunken sleep. He breathed sharply and winced at the smell.

— The embalming fluid...its new here, but only for the rich, Joe, and for heroes like Carmichael. — Jim spoke in his soft insistent way, tapping the corpse once as he spoke the name. Joe looked abruptly from the still dead face of the man he knew he'd shot...the man the police had killed...to the lively penetrating gaze of Jim McNulty.

He knows, Joe thought. He felt his dizziness grow, his legs weakening but Jim gripped his arm above the elbow, squeezing it painfully with surprising strength for his deceptively small body. — We have a job to do Joe. —

They placed Carmichael's body in the rubber sheet inside a rough pine box. They retraced their steps along the passage, grunting under the weight of the big man. They tied MacPherson more securely and left him with their best wishes for his brother the mayor's health, then struggled across the driveway to the wagon.

McNulty turned to Joe, who was shivering as if he were cold. The older man put his arm around the young man's shoulders.

—Go home, Joe alright? Straight home and rest. We've got to hide for the night and if we are caught I want you to go to Cakie. If everything works out we'll see you tomorrow when we give Carmichael a hero's burial. —

Does he know? Joe watched the wagon move away. The others moved off in various directions, each alone, but Joe remained in the shadows on the moon-dappled "honey road" until the sound of the horse and wagon had faded and he could hear the noise of the tall man in the green apron kicking against the back door of the funeral parlour. And then he ran as if the devil himself were after him.

* * *

He slept in the coal shed, waking occasionally with that disquieting sense he'd had earlier that a part of him, another self, stood off and watched indifferently the plight of the self lying in the dark and filth, shivering with the imagined cold and unfocused fear. At last he could sleep no more and stood in the entrance watching the dark silhouettes of clouds crossing the pale wafer of moon that faded as the dawn approached and settled gently into the distant horizon beyond the wide black expanse of the bay.

The house was still dark when he crept into the kitchen, along the passage and up the stairs all the way to the attic. He needed no light to gather his belongings, stuffing them heedlessly into his small worn suit case. He descended to the second floor. A door opened and Elizabeth slipped out beside him. He stiffened in shock, though he could see her faintly, the small hand at her mouth gesturing silence as she proceeded on down the stairs and out to the kitchen. She closed the hall door after them and lit a single lamp. They stood shyly a few feet apart. He had held her hand once, but never embraced her.

—Where have you been? Where are you going? Dear God I've been worried Joe. —

—The police are looking for me...— he said without any thought, and was shocked at the boastful tone of his own voice.

—The police! —

—Oh well...I just...I was in the middle of the...the attack in the street here yesterday and I...I fought with a policeman and I was afraid they'd know me — his voice trailed off.

—Oh Joe, and you were sneaking off without a word. —She threw her arms around him.

—No, no, I was going...going to a friend's is all and I would have gotten word to you.— He felt strangely apart from this sudden intimacy which previously he'd imagined so constantly. He shuddered, thinking again of that other self watching so coldly. He tried to hold her with his free arm, clutching the suitcase behind him but she sensed his reticence and pulled away.

—You don't even care about me.—

—I do...I do, it's just... — There was a boyish whining tone to his words and he stopped in anger at himself. She was standing barefoot in a long cotton nightgown, her hair hanging loosely round her shoulders. She's beautiful, he thought, and somehow didn't care. He began moving to the door.

—It's just what, Joe MacNeil? —

He opened the door and looked out into the gloomy half light of predawn.

—Oh you don't care about me at all... — There was in her voice the same childish petulance Joe had heard in his own. His anger was directed at her this time.

—Maybe. We'll see... —He spoke vaguely, as if his attention was wandering and he was gone so quickly she could say no more and burst into tears as she routinely lit the lamps and turned to the making of the breakfast.

* * *

Joe walked in a furious, deliberate way until his weariness returned and he remembered he had no destination....He walked around until the sun was up. The streets had filled with people, then emptied again as those who had

work to go to went there and he went along to the union hall. As he turned on to that street he saw the city police were guarding the door to the hall, warning off anyone who came near. A man he knew came along to where Joe stood indecisively looking up and down the street. The man glanced at Joe's suitcase but said only, — Going up to Kell's ball park? —

— Where?

— The ball park. —

Joe struggled against the dullness he felt. The man looked at him as if he might be drunk.

— Where we were to gather if they closed the hall. You know the police shot Carmichael...?

— Yes — Joe answered faintly but made no move, so the man shrugged and hurried away.

Joe went in that direction after a moment, walking quickly along the street the police had charged down. He quickened his pace as he neared the alley where Carmichael died but stopped helplessly as he came directly opposite the place and shuddered violently before hurrying on, having noticed only that the pony cart was gone and a stain, which really could have been anything, showed black against the green, weathered shingles.



Burning the Company Stores — 9" x 12" — ink — 1981

He didn't go to the ball park, a large open field actually, marked only by a diamond drawn with lime, but walked into the field beyond, where he'd gone on Sunday evening, and walked up a low, round-topped hill from which he could see the field and the streets around it. There was no one in the field but men loitered in yards and doorways all along the nearby streets. Then, as if at a signal, men began moving toward the field. Hundreds of them were filling the two streets and moving quickly across the open ground. A horse and wagon came down from farther out of town, the men making way as it proceeded onto the diamond. Joe watched all this, but still hesitated to go down. As he sat quietly in the tall grass, he thought of turning himself over to the police, but another part of his mind said no to this and he knew already he was trapped in some way. He didn't move.

The wagon stopped and Jim McNulty climbed onto the back and began speaking. He gestured repeatedly at the box next to him. Joe couldn't hear him but he knew the man was eloquently telling Joe's lies, and he knew with certainty that McNulty knew he'd lied; even if he couldn't know the truth McNulty had accepted the best relative truth for his own ends, and wasn't that what one had to do? I don't know, I don't know ... Joe interrogated himself aloud, groaning with indecision.

A sound reached him and he glanced around a moment before he recognized it. He'd heard it on Sunday. The Provincial Police were riding again, the horses a dark churning mass at the far end of the main street. Still Joe hesitated to go down. Now the crowd in the ball field heard them too, and this time they were ready with their own clubs and chains. They began to march onto the street, the wagon bearing the body of Patrick Allan Carmichael in their midst.

Joe stood and walked a few paces down the hill, stopping as the police collided with the front ranks of the workers, and a terrible noise of screaming men, panicked horses, curses and the beating of clubs against flesh rose up to his ears.

He knew he had to accept Jim McNulty's truth then, but the image came back to him of what he had done. He turned away from the battle as he'd done Sunday and ran across the hills, higher and higher to a point where he barely heard the din of the fight, from where he could see the huge sprawling bulk of the plant, and beyond that the neat ordered encampment of the soldiers, who waited through all this. Then he turned and ran on, knowing his destination this time.

When he came to the stone wall he sank down upon it in exhaustion, but recovering quickly he scrambled to find the opening where he had left the gun. As he'd run up the hill he'd thought he was coming for the gun in order to use it and, in a state of half-mad confusion, wondered if he meant to use it on them or on himself. It was as if the gun possessed the only real connection to his lies, to his cowardice, if that's what it was, to McNulty's view of the truth which Joe was now the keeper of. Suddenly he emptied the bullets into his dark trembling hand and flung them into the brush, then he turned to the gun, its blue black sheen dusted over by the pale ochre dust, pits of rust already forming on the barrel... and he saw the gun in his hand, saw the gun firing and Carmichael falling, and felt at last the numbing recoil of the heavy weapon, as he always would. He set the gun down on a rock and began to strike the cold resisting metal with a second stone, moaning over and over - Liar...liar...liar...—

When he'd put the stone aside and covered the broken useless gun he heard the noise again carried from the street by the wind and he looked about quickly for a heavy stick which he swung overhead as he ran down to join the fight.



Idle — 15" x 22" — w/c: pastel on paper — 1983