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Tower of Power

By James FitzGerald

Even as a lowly eight-year-old new boy in 1958, droning the stanzas of the school song – “High on the hill she stands/Her tower a landmark clear”—I was struck by the irony of the pronoun. After all, at Upper Canada College, that 35 acre incubator of the English Canadian elite, females were – and are – scarce. Never mind that the verse had been composed by Mary (Bubbles) Sowby, wife of the principal, or that several of my masters were closeted gays. The thrusting UCC clock tower – for more than a century a potent symbol of the Canadian Establishment, and of the city – is nothing if not masculine.

Erected in 1891, it was known as “The Four-Face Liar” because no two faces ever told the same time. Still, despite its reputation for deceit, its panoptic gaze and crowning weathervane emanated a compelling aesthetic, especially on the darkest nights. The luminous moon-faces stared down on us like Father Time, inviting us to look up, to dream of towering achievements, to aspire to timeless thoughts, even as its heavy, wrought-iron hands moved relentlessly over the Roman numerals.

Circa 1920, when Forest Hill was still a hilly forest, pranksterish UCC boys stole a cow from a neighbouring farm and led it up the creaky wooden staircase, unaware that cows were capable of travelling upstairs, but not down. Legend has it that the beast had to be butchered and carted down in pieces. For the boys, a tough lesson in the meaning of sacrifice; for the cow, a tougher lesion still.

In the mid-1940s, irate masters routinely evicted Michael Snow, the embryonic artist, from the tower’s music room for pounding out extra-curricular blues on a school piano.

In 1958, the tower was razed and then rebuilt with money donated by then family of media magnate Ted Rogers. In 1959, Time’s Arrow claimed a human life when an Italian workman, helping to erect the new tower, fell to an inglorious end.

Adolescent pranks led to new heights of bad taste in the 1990s when a crude facsimile of a massive condom was, under cover of night, hung in front of the venerable, vulnerable “cock” tower. Seven UCC generations on, boys will be boys, and many of us remain grateful for what then father of all private schools gave us: a reverence for irreverence that time may never cure.

A few years ago, another in a long line of subversive teenage boys invited a prominent comedienne to speak at a school conference on – of all things – feminism. Demurring, she is alleged to have responded: “UCC? Isn’t that the giant phallic symbol on top of the Avenue Road Hill, forcing everyone to veer to the right?”

Well, not everyone…