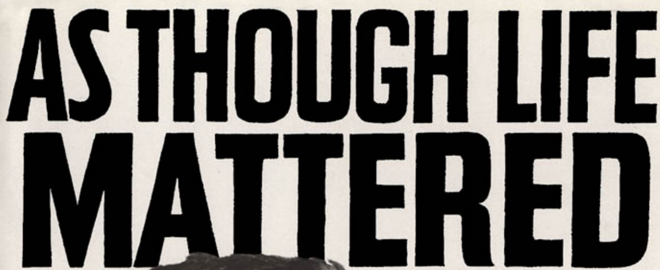

LEO KENNEDY'S STORY

PATRICIA MORLEY

As Though Life Mattered

Leo Kennedy, early 1950s.

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PATRICIA MORLEY

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As man is ever the prime object to man, already it was
my favourite employment to read character in speculation,
and from the Writing to construe the Writer.

Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (1834)

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Patricia Morley
Manotick, Ontario
August 1993

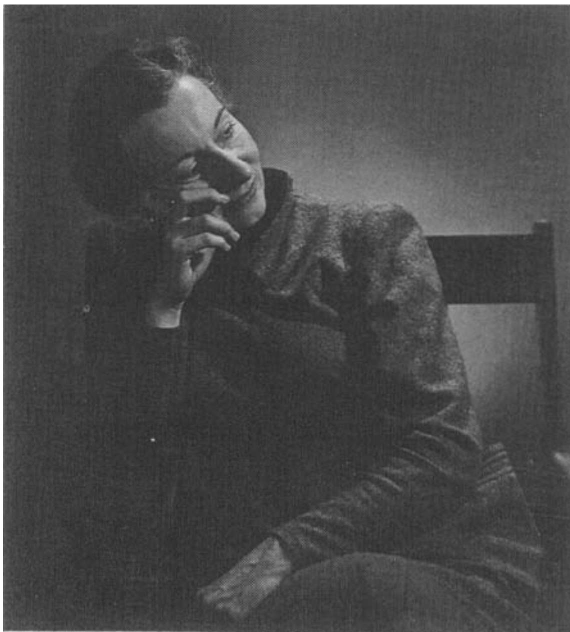
Children's games. Liverpool, early 1900s. Taken very near Leo's old neighbourhood. National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside, neg. N 86–1071

Leo at age 3, "transmogrified into a girl-child."

A day out on the Pier. New Brighton. 1920s. National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside, neg. N 86–1070

Uncle George Bullen
in front of 28 Kirkdale Vale, 1928.

F.R. Scott

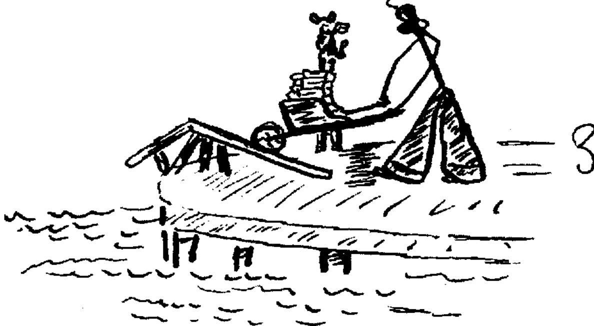


Marian Dale Scott

A.M. Klein, late 1920s, in front of his Montreal home.
National Archives of Canada, PA 178057

Dorothy Livesay, ca 1980 – "Syren of Old Nile."

Olier Public School in Montreal, grade 1. Leo is seated at far left, third from back.



Cartoon sketch by Leo, 1926.

As Though Life Mattered

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1

The Myth and the Memories

His heart was brittle,
His wits were scattered;
He wrote of dying
As though life mattered.
"Self Epitaph –
To Be Carved in Salt,"
The Shrouding (1933)

We met in Montreal in 1977. At that time Leo Kennedy was a short, portly, grey-haired man with an infectious laugh and a most irreverent sense of humour. His conversation sparkled with wit, while his observations were fresh, original, often funny. We quickly became friends. Kennedy knew that I knew his venerable place in Canada's literary history, and he asked if I would write his biography. I agreed. It was his language that snared me – his language, his vitality, and his cheerful defiance of fate.

Over the next decade, during the years of his retirement in Montreal, I played Boswell to Kennedy's Dr Johnson. When we talked, even casually, I made notes. When he telephoned, I kept pen and paper handy. We both took pleasure in this friendship, but to Kennedy, who feared that he had become a forgotten man, it meant something special. He once said that if he had not met me, he would have had to invent me. Perhaps he did.

In the late twenties in Montreal a group of cheerfully angry young men set out to revolutionize the course of poetry in Canada. Leo Kennedy was one of the self-styled "Four Horsemen." The other poets were A.J.M. Smith, Frank Scott, and A.M. Klein. They knew and admired the radically modern poets in Britain and America, Eliot and Yeats chief among them. These writers had brought radical changes to poetry in Britain after the First World War. The Montrealers saw no reason why Canadian poets should continue to write poetry that smacked of Victorian and Edwardian verse.

Kennedy, the least well-known member of the Canadian "Bloomsberries" (Leon Edel's coinage), is perhaps the most interesting as an individual. An Irish Canadian, he had what members of his tribe have called "the gift of the gab." He had emerged from relative poverty with a formal education that ended with grade six. Most of his famous friends, by contrast, had upper-class backgrounds and more than one university degree. To compensate for his lack of formal schooling, Kennedy had intelligence, imagination, and wit – a fair exchange. He had an intense love of learning, of books, and of language. The education he acquired by himself over a lifetime ranged widely across the humanities.

Kennedy also had *chutzpah*, a precious commodity. The yiddish slang for *guts* is apt, since many of Kennedy's friends were Jews and both his wives were Jewish. The term also catches something of his most striking quality, a quixotic flair, a gift for being outrageous that he cultivated with glee. This aptitude was the natural partner of his genuine love of people, laughter, and life. His "Self Epitaph – To Be Carved in Salt" catches the spirit of his life and work. Life mattered. People mattered. He regarded racial antagonisms as silly or vicious. Catholic or Jew, who cared? "I'll die whatever," he wrote in 1981, "loving everybody ... We'll all meet in wonderment when Gabriel honks that horn."

Kennedy regarded the pompous, the dishonest, and the cruel as the enemies of life. Cant was anathema to him; pomposity invited pricking. He was not one to suffer fools gladly, and his lance never lacked targets. Along with a satirist's eye for human folly went a love for incongruity, for the ridiculous and the nonsensical. The human comedy was a show of which he never tired and in which he delighted to share.

In his seventies, in retirement in Montreal, Kennedy's satirical flair was at the service of his own myth. His public image gave him pleasure and was nurtured with care. Like any artist, he felt free to shape facts to his own purpose, and he cared far more for a good story than for historical accuracy. He was fond of noting that "the family shoebox" of records held not one but two birth certificates, which showed he had been born in 1902 and 1907. Research has failed to uncover even one, but the latter date is correct. (No boxes, no certificates: what kind of story is that? Story-tellers have more fun.)

Kennedy told Peter Gzowski on CBC's "Morningside" that he had had a Dickensian childhood in Liverpool and Montreal, with a drunken father, a saintly mother, and a grandmother who looked like

Mrs Katzenjammer from the cartoon strip *The Katzenjammer Kids*, popular just before and after the Second World War. Kennedy had dropped out of school at fourteen, served as cabin boy on a ship in the West Indies, and by fifteen was earning his own living by working for his father.[1] His intelligence, and the remarkable degree to which he had educated himself, were acknowledged when he was admitted to the University of Montreal a few years later as a part-time special student in English literature.

It mattered little to Kennedy if a story put him in a bad light, as long as it was amusing. In old age he unabashedly claimed to have been refused a job by Canada Packers in 1930 because he failed to pass their intelligence test: "That was when I learned I had the IQ of a church mouse."[2] This particular church mouse was a published poet at the age of eighteen and was the first of his famous group to publish a book of his own verse.

He loved to tell how he pre-sold *The Shrouding* (1933) in Montreal by knocking on doors. When the Macmillan Company balked at the financial risk involved in publishing a volume of verse in the 1930s, Kennedy offered to raise five hundred dollars through advance sales. He then canvassed the city to sell the required number. Selling poetry is no easy task at the best of times, but in the depressed thirties the feat was extraordinary. Kennedy had no product in hand, just a smile and a silver tongue. Of course he promised that the book would be signed. It retailed at a dollar and fifty cents but sold before publication for one dollar. (As a rare book it currently sells for over two hundred.) Details of the affair varied with the telling (some of his favourite tales require collation), but his pride at selling a promised book to strangers at their front doors was unmistakable.

His favourite story from the 1930s shows him as a double agent for the striking workers at the Ford Motor Company's plant at Windsor. At the time Kennedy was managing the Ford account for his advertising agency in Detroit. Since he had friends among the Ford workers, he was party to privileged information on both sides. He helped the workers to bargain more effectively, and managed to talk Ford into donating several vans to Norman Bethune for his work at the front in Spain.

At the age of thirty Kennedy chose to exile himself to the United States for nearly forty years as an advertising copywriter. To archivist Robert Taylor he summed up his decision this way: "I left Montreal in 1937 for Toronto with the clothes on my back and a few books under my arm. There I functioned on *New Frontier*. I left Toronto for Detroit in '39 with the same equipment. From there to Chicago.

From there to Minnesota, where I caught loudmouthed bass [sic] for eleven years. I simply haven't retained MSS, letters, tearsheets, whatever."[3]

The latter claim is fortunately far from accurate. The self-myth ignores or downplays the copywriting career, seen as a necessary evil in the service of supporting a family. It also ignores the writing done during the first two decades of this exile, perhaps because Kennedy came to consider that body of writing unimportant. By relegating forty years to the ashcan, he managed to convey the effect of a resurrection in the late 1970s, one that rivalled anything in *The Shrouding*. His youthful poetry had drawn heavily on versions of the resurrection myth. His own rebirth on the Canadian literary scene, after forty years in the wilderness of the American copywriting world, seemed something of a miracle to Kennedy. And to his friends.

Back in Montreal in 1977 and more outrageous than ever, Kennedy met Mayor Drapeau at a civic reception. The mayor knew something of Kennedy's history, and asked him to write a poem in honour of the city. Kennedy, who had been observing modern Montreal with fascination and distaste, subsequently mailed the following couplet to Drapeau: "Quebec was always corrupt, of course / But even a gelding is still a horse." The mayor declined to answer.

The favourite anecdotes in the personal mythology were both true and untrue, as we will see. His father was actually a strong and responsible man with whom Leo had more in common than he cared, in youth, to recognize. Kennedy's basically happy childhood, spent in Victorian and working-class environments, had stimulated his poet's imagination and his human sympathies. Liverpool before the First World War, and Montreal before the Second, were fascinating cities where lifestyles that were fast disappearing caressed the senses and challenged the mind.

As for the forty years in the wilderness, namely his career in America with several major advertising agencies and with Reader's Digest, these years were by no means "lost" to literature. During the first two decades of this period Kennedy was writing poetry, some of which was published in magazines, and book reviews by the score, many of them for the *Chicago Sun* and the *Sun Times*. These reviews – wide-ranging, intelligent, and witty – show Kennedy to be a superb stylist in the short essay form. Throughout his lifetime he enjoyed writing letters, many of which survive. This form of writing was always a favourite.

During the latter half of the expatriate years, family concerns, including a sick wife, preoccupied him. Worry sapped his energy

and made him give priority to earning money. Medical insurance in the United States during this period was rare and hopelessly expensive. Kennedy's sense of family responsibility had always been strong. An instinct and an ethic, it had been nourished in two working-class homes where his strongest sympathies lay with women. He told "Morningside Peter" in 1985 that in the early thirties he had "two and one-half families to feed," by which he meant his wife and child, his parents, and his mother-in-law. Actually, his father was working at the time and was fully self-supporting. But by the 1970s Kennedy's mind had fused the financial help his parents needed later, in their retirement years in the 1950s and 1960s, with the financial pressures he and his wife Miriam experienced in the 1930s.

It seems evident that Kennedy's sense of financial need, over the course of a long and difficult life, was exaggerated in old age in order to ease a nagging doubt about the course taken, the choices made. Had any other course really been possible for him? The accounting of a lifetime is not done lightly. It must have been very difficult for Kennedy, near the end of the game, to see that his friends had nearly all become well known and he had not. In his shaping myths the emphasis laid on financial need was a shield and a defence as well as a reality.

Kennedy began to surface from his self-imposed exile in the mid-1970s, when trips back to Montreal became more frequent. This Rip Van Winkle was astonished to find that nearly forty years had sped by and age had crept up like a thief in the night. He was at this point beginning to be fêted. His participation was sought by the organizers of various conferences on A.M. Klein, Norman Bethune, the 1930s, and Morley Callaghan. His papers were solicited by the National Archives of Canada. This prompted the reply that he would "love to be embalmed in their files." For someone who feared that he had missed the boat, the attention was sweet. The permanent hospitalization of his wife with premature senility left Kennedy free to retire at seventy and to exchange New England for Montreal. He was happy to settle there once again, this time with his daughter-in-law and two teen-age grandsons.

Once back he found himself rampant with memory and eager for an audience. Years earlier his friend A.M. Klein had rescued from the Elizabethans a wonderful phrase to describe old age: *anecdotage*. Kennedy was now in his anecdotage, as he loved to point out. Anecdotes flowed like the wine that often accompanied them. Arthritic but still mobile, he explored the bistros, the *dépanneurs* or small groceterias, the restaurants and streets of a city that had changed

drastically since his youth. His trenchant observations were preserved in letters, conversations, and free verse – a far cry from the careful cadences of his early poetry.

In 1977, near the start of his retirement in Montreal, Kennedy acquired a biographer, an accessory that pleased him hugely and served as a source of amusement for the rest of his life. He called the biography-in-progess his obituary, and the biographer "the grave digger." (In truth, the biographer's task is to ungrave the man, not to bury him. No matter.) Kennedy was by turns solicitous for the advancement of the biography and guiltily conscious that it entailed a great deal of work. When the latter mood struck he would urge that the project be abandoned. Alternatively, he would spend great dollops of time writing to his friend the biographer, attempting to exorcise the ghosts of his past. "I realize now that for about two years," he wrote to Morley in July 1979, "I have been keeping a personal diary with you as the recipient ... Amusing things happen, since a person is living his/her autobiography til he/she dies, I stick 'em in. If you prefer, hers/his. I don't care. The two sexes are almost identical. A few minor differences. Primary and secondary sex characteristics, that's all. A bagatelle."

The Irish origins of his family played a part in Kennedy's self-image that was acknowledged largely in old age. In 1988 he admitted to having become increasingly "Irish" as the years went by, and to having warm feelings for the Irish. He had always loved the writers of the Irish Renaissance, such as O'Casey, Yeats, and Synge. During his years with Scott and Smith and the McGill group, however, his sense of himself as Irish had been suppressed by a desire to be cosmopolitan or internationally minded. His youthful distaste for what he saw as his father's Philistinism and heavy drinking also fostered the desire to be different. If Jack Kennedy was Irish, then his son would be something else. This phenomenon is not uncommon among immigrants. We could compare Kennedy with the Ukrainian Canadian painter William Kurelek, whose sense of himself as Ukrainian was submerged in youth for rather similar reasons. Later in life Kurelek became proud of his Ukrainian roots, just as Kennedy became more Irish.

In maturity the writer came to consider his verbal quickness to be both an Irish and a family characteristic: a family trait. The Irish temperament, in a well-turned phrase of the anglo-Irish writer Cyril Connolly, runs to "an exaggerated use of words."[4] The aptness of Connolly's description in Kennedy's case is startling. Reviewing an anthology of Irish verse in the 1940s, Kennedy rebuked the editor for assigning so little space to "that well-developed Irish commodity,

sarcasm. Colorful invective, that other Irish folk art, does not get the play I would like to see, either." Kennedy's own command of these Irish attributes was superb.

Kennedy's emotions also ran to extremes, and anger flared easily. In retirement Kennedy is a lively but very gentle man, with courteous, almost courtly manners. He tends to call women "Madam." The shadow side of this gentleness, the inverse of his kindness and consideration, is a murderous temper that flares up unexpectedly. This rage, the Kennedys agreed, was another family trait: "All the Kennedy men were like that."[5] In both father and son the ferocity sat oddly with the gentleness, raising puzzling questions.

One of Kennedy's cherished possessions, an antique sword- cane, catches the dichotomy of sweetness and rage rather neatly. It gave the aged writer great pleasure to carry the innocuous-looking cane in Montreal and, later, in Pasadena, California. These modern Babylons sometimes erupted in violence, and Kennedy had no intention of being a victim if he could prevent it. To Morley he wrote in June 1987, after a severe bout of arthritis: "I have learned to walk again, with the assistance of a sword-cane, which nobody knows is a sword. I carry the cane to intimidate the ferocious Pasadena traffic which pours like a flood at intersections, and I also carry the cane in the event that I shall need it. I did on one occasion whip the thing out when I was solicited by a rather burly young man who wanted my wallet – there were four dollars in the wallet – and the flash of the steel startled him so that he took off."

Like the Elizabethan dramatists beloved of Kennedy in his youth, exaggeration was meat and drink to this Irishman. As Connolly would have understood. Connolly's life (1903–74) has certain intriguing parallels with Kennedy's. The British essayist and critic is best known for his fine collection of essays entitled *Enemies of Promise* (1983), a volume Kennedy knew and admired. Connolly was a brilliant but undisciplined literary critic, an eccentric whose frankly outrageous behaviour and barbed conversation attracted some acquaintances and repelled others. The brilliant promise of his early days at university was never fulfilled, at least not in books. Revisionist critics of his career are coming to the conclusion that the man's masterpiece was *himself*. His colourful personality outshone his work.

The analogy with Kennedy is worth considering. The "enemies" (or at least the dangers) to the promise shown in Kennedy's early volume of verse were his love of life, his lack of discipline, and the relentless sense of family loyalty bred into him in youth. He was by no means lazy in the normal sense of the word; indeed, few men have worked harder. What he lacked – and for fame the factor is

critical – was ambition, at least until old age offered other perspectives.

Kennedy told Peter Gzowski and others that in youth he had had an ambition "to write a book of poetry, get it published, be content with it and then to hell with it. And that's precisely what I did." The rather flip explanation ignores the fact that he never lost his love of language. Words gave him tremendous joy. Despite this enduring bond with words, the publication of *The Shrouding* meant that Everest had been conquered, and at the age of twenty-six. Prose, and witty one-liners for business clients, brought financial returns that poetry did not. Kennedy continued to write poetry throughout much of his life, but his first energies went elsewhere.

Like Connolly, he devoted large chunks of time to reviewing books, especially in Chicago in the 1940s. Mercifully, many of these reviews have survived, despite Kennedy's habitual disregard for papers. His reviews are witty, humane, and very self-revealing. They provide a partial autobiography of mind and spirit. In an earlier age, in easier financial circumstances, Kennedy would have become a man of letters. His prose is as valuable as his verse, but much of it remains relatively inaccessible.

The imagination circles back, hypnotically, to the single book, published when Kennedy was very young. Had he died soon after 1933, he would have been celebrated as a poet of tremendous promise. By critical consensus, he played an important part in Canada's poetic revival in the 1920s and 1930s.

Kennedy, however, did not die young. This sturdy romantic remains, in 1993, a stubborn survivor. Eagerness and intensity mark the elderly Kennedy, just as they marked the young man. In the end, the poet and the man are inseparable. The man who loved words is the man who loved people, the man whose zest for the human comedy has never faltered. "He wrote of dying / As though life mattered." Kennedy's own life mattered, and it clamoured insistently to be written.