

The Rustification of Henry Thomas Brown (Book 2 of 3)

Andrew Thomas Hunter

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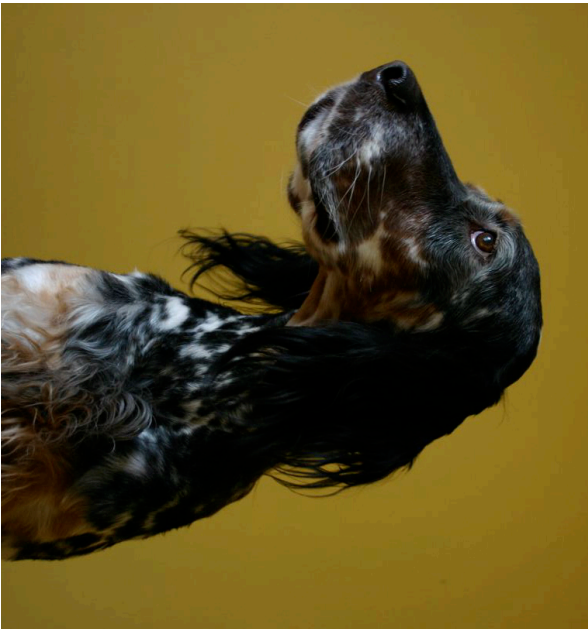
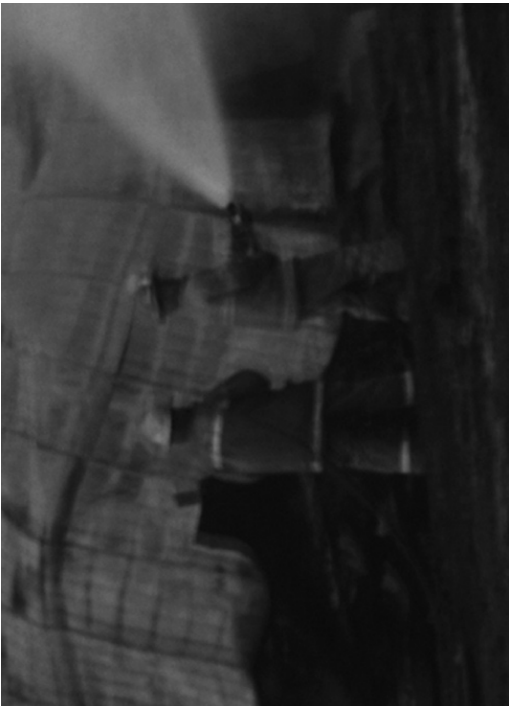
Dearest Roger,

I apologize for not writing to you sooner, it seems like a long time since I saw you last even though it has only been a month, but I have, as usual, been traveling and there has been much change at home and work (all for the best). This seems a poor excuse for not writing to a friend after such a traumatic parting. Please forgive me. That you are sadly missed goes without saying. Your sister Penny remains in mourning but we are confident she will recover soon as we have arranged for a new companion for her. He will be arriving soon and I am certain that you will be pleased to know that he is a relative of yours. The kids have decided to name him Nigel (I have enclosed a picture). Lisa sends her love as well, she stills refers to you as "Our beautiful Mister."

I am in Lennoxville again having made the final visit in search of Mr. Brown the "furnaceman." This is of course the trip I intended to make with you as I so desperately needed your help in trying to locate Brown's roaming spirit and I now wish you had accompanied me earlier in the search as I am convinced all would have unfolded differently. The weather here this week is your favourite, early fall, the leaves changing to an intense palette of reds, oranges and yellows. The air is clear, crisp and slightly damp, the ground cool and moist, and as I walk around the university and about the cemetery where Brown is buried, that distinct sound of you snorting into the ground, your nose pressed to the earth to draw out the scents from the soil, echoes in my mind. I know you would have found Brown, that you would have been the ideal link between us and that you would have established the trust that I have not been able to establish and which has lead to my failure to accomplish what I set out to here. It was, perhaps, an overly ambitious and flawed undertaking and I do believe that in the end it is the responsibility of Bishop's University to settle this and to sincerely undertake a "derustification" of Henry Thomas Brown.

I don't think I ever mentioned to you another deeper reason, besides my usual interest in the forgotten and marginalized, that drew me to Brown. Actually, it is two reasons – first, the date of his death (1896) and, second, his initials (HTB). The date corresponds with the year of my grandfather's birth and, as you know, much of my work has been rooted in my desire to fill the void of Grampa's passing when I was only 10 and the fact that he seemed to just disappear. (Believe me, the fact that you both suffered from stomach cancer is not lost on me.) HTB also seemed to be composed of a combination of initials of deep personal resonance for me (H= Herbert, T = Thomas, B = Bert) all referencing my grandfathers. Herbert/Bert was my Mom's father and the one I have remained obsessed with. Thomas was my Dad's father who died before I was born. (Thomas is, of course, also my middle name.) So once again I seem to be trapped in a futile attempt to resolve a piece of my past and to understand the continuing presence of my grandfather in my life and work. Searching for Brown, and such figures as Billy, Walker and Jimmy Chesett in previous projects, really just feels like a search for Grampa. I thought when I went to France a few years ago, to walk in the No-Man's-Land of the Somme and the landscape of Grampa's war, that I would have been able to put my obsessions to rest, to encounter the true source of the void, the "Dark Matter" Grampa carried. I guess I was wrong.

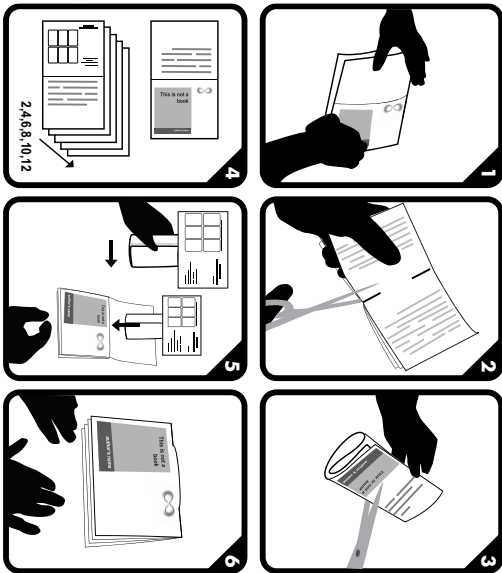
Anyway, back to things here in Lennoxville. My playing of the ballad "Banish Misfortune" did not work as planned as there continue to be fires throughout the region. Yesterday morning I photographed one of the latest, a large store and apartment building on Queen Street. Sam from Café Java (my favourite coffee place in town) tells me that there was another similar fire



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Published on the occasion of the exhibition, "The Rustification of Henry Thomas Brown" at the Foreman Art Gallery, Bishop's University, Lennoxville, Quebec, Canada, September 30 - December 12, 2009. Curated by Andrew T. Hunter with contributions by Crystal Mowry and Colette Laliberte. Book 2 of 3.

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I don't think I ever mentioned to you another deeper reason, besides my usual interest in the forgotten and marginalized, that drew me to Brown. Actually, it is two reasons – first, the date of his death (1986) and, second, his initials (HTB). The date corresponds with the year of my grandfather's birth and, as you know, much of my work has been rooted in my desire to fill the void of Grampa's passing when I was only 10 and the fact that he seemed to just disappear. (Believe me, the fact that both of us suffered from stomach cancer is not lost on me.) HTB also seemed to be composed of a combination of initials of deep personal resonance for me (H=Herbert, T = Thomas, B = Bert) all referencing my grandfathers. Herbert/Bert was my Mom's father and the one I have remained obsessed with. Thomas was my Dad's father who died before I was born. (Thomas is, of course, also my middle name.) So once again I seem to be trapped in a futile attempt to resolve a piece of the past and to understand the continuing presence of my grandfather in my life and work. Searching for Brown, and such figures as Billy, Walker and Jimmy Chewett in previous projects, really just feels like a search for Grampa. I thought when I went to France a few years ago, to walk in the No-Man's-Land of the Somme and the landscape of Grampa's war, that I would have been able to put my obsessions to rest, to encounter the true source of the void, the "dark Matter" Grampa carried. I was wrong.

Anyway, back to things here in Lennoxville. My playing of the ballad "Banish Misfortune" did not work as planned as there continue to be fires throughout the region. Yesterday morning I photographed one of the latest, a large store and apartment building on Queen Street. Sam from Café Java (my favourite coffee place in town) tells me that there was another similar fire the same day up the hill on College Street. I will go there later to check it out. I have included images of a number of the fires in the exhibition along with a video of me playing my mandolin in the cemetery. (I really do need to practice more. Perhaps my shoddy execution of the ballad is the reason that effort was fruitless!). My friend Crystal (who you met in the spring) is coming up on Monday to install, she has built the central component of the exhibition, a model barn based on images of the burning of the Laliberté family farm. I am really pleased that Crystal has joined me and look forward to working with her in the future. Colette Laliberté is an old friend, a painter who now lives in Toronto but who grew up near Lennoxville on her family farm (La ferme Riomil Laliberté in Stanstead). She did me a great favour and interviewed her family about the fire that destroyed their barn about a decade ago and that tragically killed over one hundred head of prized Holsteins. The video she made (that also includes reminiscences about the fire in their century old farmhouse a couple years ago) is quite wonderful, imbued with great emotion and it says a lot about the meaning of home and community and the intense relationship that exists between people and animals. It reminded me of the writings of Jane Goodall, Donna Haraway and Temple Grandin, all of who have written extensively about the intensity of interspecies relationships. Sorry, that sounds a bit too theoretical. You certainly didn't need to read books to understand our "interspecies" friendship.



sorry for the suffering I may have caused you and the pain you so stoically endured. You deserved better from a friend blinded by the quest to craft a compelling tale. Telling stories, as I keep discovering, is never an inert endeavour and I will consider hard the goals of my future narratives. I really do struggle with the thought I may have inadvertently sacrificed a friend.

Please remember your promise on the last day we were together and do search for Grampa. I know you can find him and let me know when you do. And please keep watching over the girls. I keep thinking of that old Carter Family song, "Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone?" I so miss you old friend.

Much Love Mister,

Andrew

PS – I just came across this in an 1897 copy of the school paper The Mitre: "Long may the School flourish under the favour of protection of Roger!"

It would be impossible to capture the fullness of these interviews here but there are a couple of potent moments worth sharing. It is clear that the sad fate of the animals in the first fire had a profound effect on Paul-Emile and he struggled to tell that part of the story. His son, Mathieu became equally emotional as he remembered wondering what had happened to his dog (he was only 10 and away at school). Fortunately the dog survived. Colette's mother speaks passionately about the importance of home and the meaning of the century farmhouse that was almost lost. They all speak of the deep significance of the barn fire to Paul-Emile, his strong bonds with the community and fellow farmers, who helped him rebuild, and the impact it had on his difficult decision to carry on farming. They all speak of the "presence" or "spirit" of Paul-Emile's late father. There are two aspects of the events around the barn fire that have stuck with me. The first is the fact that they were to find out later that someone they knew had passed by around the time the fire had first broken out (around midnight) but did not stop even though they saw flames emanating from the barn. They assumed that because there were a number of cars at the house that the family knew about the fire. It is still hard to imagine why this person would not have stopped, if they had the fire would probably have been far less tragic. In the end, the fire continued for several more hours before Paul-Emile and Colombe Arpin were aware of it. How they found out I find incredibly haunting.

Colette interviewed Paul-Emile and Colombe Arpin separately on this matter and core elements of their stories match, however, who knew first and the sequence of the details are reversed. Paul-Emile speaks of being awoken by the an intense glow in the bedroom followed by the phone ringing. When he answers the phone, he only hears static (the fire in the barn having melted the phone lines and causing it to ring). In Colombe Arpin's version, it is the phone that rings first, she answers it, and then she realizes that the room she is in is bathed in the same glow that Paul-Emile described. To point out the discrepancies is not to discount the events, events that were clearly traumatic. Memory plays tricks, it is never perfect, and the act of telling a story is never easy. It is the essence of the story that is essential, never all the precise details.

I just keep thinking of the car passing hours earlier and not stopping, the phone ringing, the static on the line, a young boy fearing for his dog. -A. Hunter



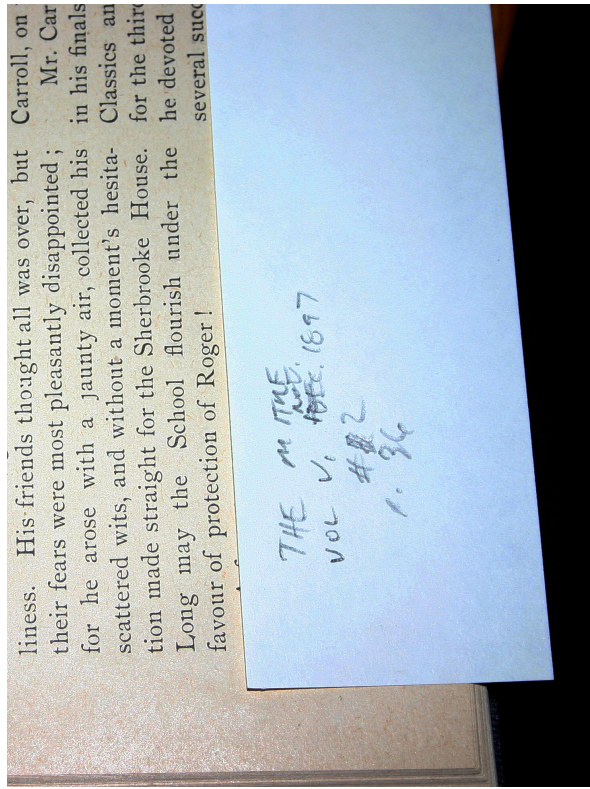
Oh, I almost forgot to mention one more thing about the exhibition. Do you remember that great photograph I showed you that I took in the boiler-room here at Bishop's? The one of the icon of the hand holding flame that was embossed on the boilers? Vicki Genevieve and I let me paint it on the wall of the gallery. I stayed here late last night and did the painting, its huge, about 6 feet high. I'm going to install photos on either side of it and Crystal's barn will be in the middle of the room in front of it. Anyway, I will send you some pictures in my next letter.

I am going to sign off soon as I need to get back to work finishing the show and I need to finish editing the video and you know that I am not particularly adept at the technical stuff (Thank God Crystal is coming!). I also wanted to let you know that I was thinking of retiring my patchwork tweed cap, the one I always wore that people said made them think of you, because I was afraid I might lose it. (I was cycling with Giles and I am when I left it in that pub in Oxford when I was cycling with Giles and I am eternally grateful to the pub owner for saving it for me.) But then I thought I really do need to keep it as it is there is something about taking responsibility for looking after it, and the memories of our time together, that is essential. It would be too easy to stash it away in safe keeping like I did with so many things, making them precious, artifacts of the past. I need to carry the past, to wear it out it, wear it, sweat in it and on those days when I think of you, and Grampa, let the tears drop onto the patches of weathered wool, stain and infuse it with memories.

La ferme Riomil Laliberté

My knowledge of the story of the Laliberté family farm came from a chance encounter with an old friend, Toronto-based artist Colette Laliberté. Colette and I were having drinks following the end of term critiques at the Ontario College of Art and Design in the spring of 2009. I was telling Colette about some of my current projects, and when I mentioned this project, and my interest in all the fires in the Lennoxville area, she insisted (with great excitement) to tell me the basic tale of the fires at her family farm. (I had no idea that Colette was from the Lennoxville area otherwise I would have sought her out much sooner.) Colette suggested that we visit the farm together and meet her brother and mother and hear first hand about these events. Unfortunately, our schedules did not align, but this turned out to be a virtue as Colette offered to undertake a video interview with her family. The resulting video, included in the exhibition, offers far more than I could have ever obtained, not only because my French is so basic but also because being interviewed by a family member resulted in much more open responses. Colette clearly knew what questions to ask. The resulting document is incredibly rich and I can't do justice to its intensity here.

La ferme Riomil Laliberté S.E.N.C is located on road 143, about four kilometres before the town of Stanstead, Québec. It has been in the Laliberté family for over a century. The name "Riomil" stands for the first and last letters of Colette's father's first name, "Rosario," and "mil" for her brother Paul-Emile, the current owner of the farm. The farm was the site of two major fires within the past decade, the first, a catastrophic fire in 1995 that destroyed the barn along with over one-hundred head of prized Holstein cattle. The second, only a few years ago, was caused by an electrician who drilled into the wiring and caused the house to begin to burn from inside the walls. On my behalf, Colette interviewed five members of her family: her brother Paul-Emile along with his wife Colombe Arpin and son Mathieu, as well as her sister Stella Pierre-Louis and their mother Gemma Colgan Laliberté.



Reproduced on the following pages are images of Bishop's University as it now appears, the site of Henry Thomas Brown's unmarked grave and *La ferme Riomil Laliberté* in Stanstead. This publication is the second of three. The first publication features images of various burnt buildings and sites of fires in the Lennoxville area that I attribute to the spirit of Henry Thomas Brown. I do not claim that he has intentionally caused these conflagrations but that his mere unsettled presence has caused these fires. The third publication in this series will include documentation of the exhibition installed at the Foreman Art Gallery, September 30-December 12, 2009.

-A. Hunter