DUNANY

AS I REMEMBER

DUNANY

BETH SUTHERLAND VAN LOBEN SELS

To

DONALD and DOROTHY

To supplement their
own rememberings.

Love Beth

on to Mary Dec 1995

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I do acknowledge that my father sent me to learn to type the summer following my first year at McGill. I stayed with it something less than three weeks and then retired from Business School feeling superior to the whole approach. I make no further apologies for the typing which follows.

A. E. S. v L. S.

MY FIRST TRIP TO DUNANY

"Mile End" is a name that suggests conclusion rather than a starting place but it was the name of a railway station on the outskirts of Montreal from which the family entrained on a fateful trip to Dunany. The train of course was not going all the way to Dunany, it was bound for Lachute, a journey of some forty miles.

Getting to the station had already involved vast planning with a man to drive my father's car back to the "yard" after driving us across town. An ample margin of time had been allowed for catching the train so there had been a long wait on hard benches before my mother, my father, my little sister and I answered the summons, "all aboard!"

Surely my baby brother must have been there too unless it could have been before his time. If there, he fitted serenely into the scene and my mother was free to have a splendid fight with a Frenchman with bristling mustache. He opened the engagement by turning a seat. Seats could all face one way or alternate ones reverse to allow a party to sit together. He must have done it quite abruptly so a roast of beef which was going as an offering to our hostess went rolling down the aisle. Now if the man had made some insulting remark to my mother she could have treated the situation with lofty silence, particularly as she didn't speak French, but nobody could treat our provisions so casually and get away with it. She released the pent up feelings of our long wait on this surprised traveller. She went into such details as her careful selection of the meat, his wilful ruining of our visit to the country, how it always made

her feel ill to ride backwards implying that he had devined this and was deliberately forcing her to be seated in such a position. All manner of things came up in no particular relation to the flight of the roast which by this time had been retrieved with its wrapping still intact. Gradually the pressure subsided and we were all seated.

Father was philosophical about Mother's sudden outbursts. He knew that he could not reach her until the tide had ebbed. I used to feel embarrassment in the commotion that was stirred up but he also had a vicarious experience of having tension dissipate which compensated to some extent for his discomfort.

The remaining train trip was uneventful but the frequent stops made the journey about two hours so we were at least three hours from home when we reached Lachute and looked about anxiously for the man with the horse and buggy who would take us the seven miles into the hills known as "going in back". He was meeting the train for his mail bag; carrying passengers was a side-line. Our plans had had to take into account that mail service was only three times a week. The mailman went all the way into Lake Louisa where he lived and where he had started his day at dawn.

The vehicle was a two-seater and in the eyes of a child rose to a great height. Nothing in my experience compared to the bewildering altitude and feeling of exposure until years later when I was brave enough to go on a ferris wheel.

At first it was a relief just to be out of the stuffy train into the fresh air and sunshine. The general novelty of the experience was renewing but we were tired. The enormous wheels going round and round kept drawing my attention. The effect was hypnotic. It seemed to me impossible not to follow the turning movement with my eyes. Soon I felt motion-sickness.

I can still hear Mother's voice across more than half a century saying, "Don't watch the wheels, Bessie!"

I tried to watch the trees but there were so many of them, so close together that they seemed to be moving too. Father's advice was to look far ahead up the road. Unfortunately from my position the whole view ahead was the mailman's back. I felt caught in a situation that would never, never end.

At Lachute the flat river plain began to break into hilly land where the road was a winding, sandy trail and the ride into the lake could be expected to add another two hours to our journey. The unknown DUNANY which had been our goal for so many hours assumed a kind of monstrous shape in my imagination. I have no recollection of the arrival; perhaps I had fallen asleep.

Waking next morning in a strange room, I first thought that I was still in the vivid, colorful place of dreams. Overhead and down to the very bed were bright pictures as close as they could be to one another. I knew such images in my own world of make-believe but these I could touch with my hand. They went climbing up into the centre of the room. There were young and old people being happy and sad and surprised; there were dogs and horses and birds; there were cars and trains . The world was spread before my eyes . I learned later that these wonders were Saturday Evening Post covers which had been used to paper the sloping attic ceiling. Could any other guest-room ever have such magic ?

After a while I became aware that bacon was cooking and coffee brewing and something else; that specially delicate aroma of home-made bread toasted over wood coals. Now for the first time I saw a hole in the floor and a ladder leading to the living-room below. Uncle Tom was calling that breakfast was ready and that he was about to store the ladder for the day. Soon from the safe position of being downstairs I was facinated to see the ropes and pulleys take the ladder back up against the lower ceiling.

What a wonderful new day had been born! The wood-burning stove was taking the edge off the morning chill. Food never tasted better. The warmth of family and friends spread comfortingly over everything.

There is a way of saying, "Dunany" with the syllables singing like musical notes, a beautiful word for a lilting, Celtic voice. Aunt Flo may not have been a direct descendant of the first Irish settlers in the area but the name, Dunany sang on her tongue so that I knew she loved those hills and that little lake.

My feeling always was that where she and Uncle Tom lived was Dunany. They called their house "Flotom" but that didn't fool me.

How long that first visit lasted I have no way of knowing. I remember finding soft-water clam shells on the sandy bottom of the lake where the water was shallow; that Dory and I had a toy sail boat. We played house on the rocks with a fine flat one for a table and made teacups with leaves shaped by pleating the sides and pinning them with twigs. There was some rainy weather when we made a merry-go-round of cardboard. It had a gay red and white striped roof and Uncle Tom mounted it on the victrola turntable. It was truly a marvel.

Now and again the memory of the ride "in" would come to me like recalling a nightmare and the horrible certainty that another such trip was between me and home would rise in me like a wave of sickness. But my father used to say that we are never required to suffer more than we can bear; unconcsiousness takes over. I just do not remember the return journey.

I think I am safe in saying that that was our only train-horse and buggy experience because Dad was one of the pioneers with a motor vehicle over the Lachute to Dunany road. He drove a Studebaker seven-passenger touring car with a tool box mounted on one of the outside running boards. The trip was still very long and frought with hazards but accomplished in one mode of transportation.

The expedition was never embarked on unless there had been at least three days free of rain otherwise the clay around Saint Hermos would be impassable. How we'd eventually get back was a spicy and exciting unknown. So the weather being propitious we'd set out with a guide book. It advised following the telephone poles which worked outwell until the poles took off over a field where there was no road. The book mentioned churches and school houses as principal land marks but ther always seemed some discrepancy between the descriptions and the actual

surroundings.

There were many visits to FLOTOM and they no doubt merge for me. One time the McRobies were in the car with us, we were driving in from Lachute after dark. The engine got overheated and water was carried in a cardboard flashlight case from a stream. It happened near Tom's cedar swamp operation, but that is another story.

There was another time when a shortcut was tried below Lachute with the expectation of arriving in town by the cemetry road. Whether we lost the main tracks or sand had blown over the road I don't know but we got badly stuck in sand dunes. Tom plodded on by foot and eventually returned with a farmer and his horse. We were slowly pulled back to firm ground. Walking along beside the operation with his hand on the mudguard Tom was moved to remark that he hadn't felt like this since being a pallbearer at a funeral.

Just when the idea of having a place of our own took root I don't remember. Certainly we spent a summer, maybe two in a rented house on Black Lake. I well remember being with my father on the present site and hearing him say: "This is where the house will be built."

The basic house was put up in two weeks by a Lachute contractor but Dick Matthews built the fireplace. He was a native and he appropriately built with local fieldstone. He was proud of his knowledge of installing dampers.

THE MATTHEWS

We came to have a special relationship with the Matthews. They lived in a log cabin about a mile back through the woods from our house. We took the innovating step of going to them for milk when the farm on Boyd Lake wasn't always able "to spare:" as much as we needed. This commerce enormously expanded the Matthews' contacts with the outside world.

Dick was a handsome man in his thirties. He was tall and broad-shouldered and swung an ax with a beautiful rhythmic ease. He looked to be one whose energies and interests would be absorbed by the physical world but the candid blue eyes had something of the mysticism of the Celts. He was the leader of an obscure religious sect.

His wife, Minnie was a very warm-hearted, out-going person . She suffered from goiter and the enlarged neck seemed to have the same circumference as her head and her voice was exceedingly deep.

This couple had no children of their own but were bringing up two boys. Just how the older one, Clarence came into their care I never Knew but Ward was her sister's youngest. Minnie took him for a visit to relieve the pressures of a large family and the visit went on indefinitely.

For several years a part of the summer routine was the walk with the milk cans. The path went through Dick's big hay field after emerging from the wooded area. This was always referred to as the bush, never the woods. There was something exceedingly satisfying for city children in having this regular relationship with the sources of nourishment.

Quite suddenly Dick took sick and after a few days of acute pain he died of a ruptured appendix. His sect would not tolerate surgery. He simply acceptedwhat he felt to be his fate saying, "I wish I could have you to Glory with me, Minnie."

I shall never forget the look on Dr. Patterson's face the day of the funeral.

Ward went back to his family on the next farm and Minnie took Clarence with her to the Southern Townships. There was a sale of the effects. That was the source of our wood-burning stove.

JOHN MURPHY

When the kind, warm, beautiful days come to the Laurentians they are precious. The winter is long, from November to April. Late may and June bring swarms of mosquitoes and black flies. Even the high summer months of July and August can have cold spells and three-day rains are to be expected. So a fine day with all the conditions right draws everyone outdoors . Even the taciturn Irishman, John Murphy, would be moved to come out of his seclusion deep in the bush and present himself for work.

Doing for city folks was never applied for. The vacationers had to tactfully court any services. They were looked on as intruders who only played at living. Wresting a livelihood from the rocky land of the Laurentians was precarious but those who had come from even harder conditions in Ireland were resigned to the hardship and had a fierce pride in their independence.

John was a native and even in this remote settlement he was a solitary, withdrawn from his own people. So although he was working on this summer cottage and had known the family for years, his approach to my mother asking for boiling water to make a hot drink to have with his lunch was one of great courage and daring.

"Just set it back on the range to boil a bit," said John refusing to accept hot water poured over the leaves as tea. The erstwhile coffee can had a black bottom that had known many fires. He liked green tea, he liked it "cooked", and he liked it strong.

On his first jobs for "city folks" he would set down his tools and leave a job if a woman came on the scene. Could be a matter of days before he would reappear, tentatively, like a wild creature whose habitat had been i nvaded. Very gradually over the

years he had found it possible to tolerate the presence of a woman and now was bold enough to deliberately communicate and actually to give directions.
"He was long and lean and brown" but nothing about him evoked "the ribbed sea sand". He never saw the sea, never any body of water larger than a few small Laurentian lakes, but John built boats. During the winter he would make one on order bringing it out on a wagon and launching it when the ice went out of the lake in the spring.

When Tom McRobie had proposed the building of the first boat he wanted something for fishing and John needed some cash. A man could be quite self-sufficient but certain basic foods and sullpies called for money. Neither of th :m knew that something had been set in motion that would bring John out of deep isolation to some measure of shared living.

John built row boats and a new generation of vacationing children grew up learning to propel them, to fish from them, to dive from them, accepting them as normal being unaware of their unique design. John must have gone back in his imagination to some racialmemory and worked out the details on his own. He certainly was removed from the prototype of an oarlock. He erected sturdy steel spikes on the sides of the boat and drilled holes in the oars to fit over them. First there was one set of these, then later models could be rowed from two positions. The boats were very wide and flat-bottomed and although somewhat awkward and not renowned for speed they were as untipable as craft could be.

This man was not far removed from the adventuruos spirits who made the journey from Ireland to settle in this land. What had happened to make him a hermit? Why the excessive fear of women? Had the loneliness of homesteading starved the warm Irish heart of his mother so that she had lost her equilibrium? Had he been nourished with the bitter milk of a young

woman banished by a puritanical community? Or had he been brought up by a father who had buried his feelings with a young wife's death? Had the child been orphaned when very young some family would have absorbed him.

These questions were in the mystery of the man who lived alone, deep in the woods.

THE FARM
Boyd Lake

"Sarah's stayin' for a spell," old Stewart Boyd would remark casually compressing his sister-in-laws sixteen-hour working days into one drowled sentence. "She's Bella's sister," he'd continue and the two women would nod and smile and wipe their hands on their aprons to cover their embarrassment at having so much attention called to them.

He was addressing some twelve or fifteen "city folk", mostly children, waiting on the porch for the mailman to come from Lachute which he did three times a week in a horse-drawn vehicle. The official duty of being a post master was taken very seriously by Stewart. Obviously he had to be in from the fields in plenty of time to receive HIS MAGESTY'S MAIL and prepare to sort it into pigeonholes erected for the purpose in the front room. No electronic machine could give the personal reception that Dunany mail received. How could a non-personal contrivance be interested in the activities of postcard senders or care to speculate on why the Black Lake folks were hearing so often from a certain correspondent. Helpful advice would be offered by the waiting group about names of house guests unfamiliar to the postmaster. After at least half an hour the moment of distribution came. Days that yielded parcels built up to an even greater climax. Speculation as to contents was charged with excitement.

Sarah's keen, sharp glance would dart around taking in everything. The noon-time boiled dinner was over as were the morning's baking, churning, and ironing with flat-irons heated on the wood-burning stove, so polishing the range was really a movement to keep company with the visiting because she never sat down to do nothing. The weather would be discussed and who was keeping well and who was poorly,

and how the folks were back to the Glen.

Sarah would come from "in back", stay a spell and then rotate to another relative. She was unmarried and moved among the members of her clan wherever she was needed. She had always seemed an old lady of uncertain age who went on indestructibly from decade to decade. Her body was thin and wiry; the skin of her face seemed stretched across the bones and at the same time able to fold in fine wrinkles. Her hair never became white but had long since ceased to be brown or black and was pulled to a tight bun at the back of her head, which usually supported a prim, straight-brimmed straw hat. Both Sarah and her sister had some long hairs on their chins which gave a witchy look behind which they were both extremely shy.

The earliest morning excursion to the farm for milk would find Sarah pouring the new milk into the separator as though the big pails did not tax her ninety pounds. In the evening, about sunset, after the night milking chores she would walk slowly down to the spring by the lake and tote two enormous pails of the fresh spring water back to the house. This is how she comes to mind most clearly, moving as one moves when motion finds a rhythmic pace that is capable of continuing hour after hour.

Stewart and Bella had two sons. The older one, Nathaniel came to have a curious relationship to our household. Mother had a deep, pervasive fear of forest fire and up at Black Lake felt far from the center of the summer community; nearer to the devouring flames of a possilbe conflagration. She couldn't sleep with the responsibility of the children during the week. So an arrangement was made to have Nat sleep on our verandah Mondays through Thursdays. Mother would have to go and shake him awake in the mornings to get him back to the farm to work

but knowing that he was there to be roused was supportive to her.

One time when Father was in Dunany on vacation he was called into the city. He expected the business would be dispatched quickly so with the prospects of returning the same evening (how travel had speededup!) he asked Stewart if his son, Nat could go with him for the experience of visiting Montreal. The boy had never been more than ten miles from the home farm. Permission was granted and a memorable day began.

By afternoon when we children went for the mail Stewart was pacing nervously back and forth, shaking his head and allowing that had he had time to think it over he never would have let the boy go/

Meanwhile Nat was in a wonderland of the previously unknown. The size of the fields en route astonished him. The flatness of the St. Lawrence Valley plain and the marvel of highway bridges amazed him. Never had he seen such crowds of people as swarmed in the city.

Dad enjoyed showing the sights to this delighted youngster and deliberately chose a cafeteria for lunch for the novelty of the experience. When they returned to Dunany about dusk their were no words of thanks for the trip from Stewart but the expression of great relief that "My boy is back safe!"

Who knows when seeds are sown. Nat was the son who later established a successful business out in the big world beyond Dunany.

Mother loved having company around and I was encouraged to have house parties. Every summer during the high-school years five or six girls would come up for two weeks. . Swimming and eating were the major activities with creative spurts into talent shows. Dory loved to swim and seemed her freest self in a happy relationship with that element. We did most anything that came along in a giggling group. We rode the wagon with Victor the summer he was hauling gravel for our road. We made epic walks to Lachute. We giggled some more at the movies on rare evening trips to town. We played golf a bit but really came into our own at the Club Teas.

Donny must have found the world very full of girls, bunches of girls. Anyway he pitched a tent for himself down on the point. This was a piece of property adjacent to the original purchase which was owned by Aunt Flo's step-sister's husband who had planned to build on it before he had a chance to buy land on Clear Lake. Father made the deal for the point in Montreal one stormy, snowy day in the depth of winter. Some times Don's friend, Rhys, reinforced his masculine position at the tent.

In the college years mixed parties came to take more interest in golf but as important as golf was the lake was the natural center. One could be in it, on it, or viewing it most of the time.

NAT BOYD
Aunt Flo
DORY, DON
Bessie
MOTHER DAD

GOLF

Golf was, however part of the way of life. We children started to learn the game with a small-sized mashie. The course was lovingly developed from some previously cultivated farm land but mostly from brush and swamp and rocks. Father had been one of the original twenty who made the first purchase. He served many years as treasurer and then as president. He gave engineering advice about drainage and helped to make plans as the course grew from three , to six, to nine holes involving many rearrangements of starting place and sequence.

There used to be a short second hole which was absorbed in subsequent reshuffles of the layout. It was dangerous because an abrupt rise in front of the tee called for a well lofted shot and the green was entirely out of sight although only about seventy-five yards distant. I was with my father playing this hole one day and had been posted to the top of the hill to watch. It was amiserable li ttle hole with great opportunities for lost balls in the surrounding brush.

"You made the green", I shouted back.

Then wonder of wonders the ball rolled, as if it had eyes, right into the cup!

"It's in the hole, Dad!"

Father never made any great exhibition of his emotions but I could tell how very pleased he was by the way a smile would keep twitching the corners of his mouth. It gave him a slightly foolish but very happy appearance.

The PUNCH BOWL was another hole where most people had to make a blind shot. The flag was visible from the high tee but from the bottom of the bowl, where most drives either landed or rolled, it was completely out of sight. A charming little belfry housed a deep-toned bell which was rung by play-

ers leaving the green as a signal to those in the marshy places by the brook that it was now safe to shoot.

The early greens weren't green at all. They were more or less levelled patches in the sand. After a rain many little rivulet gullies would lead to the cup. If luck placed the ball in one of them then most any casual stroke would send it on a meandering trip that would eventually reach the hole and sink. But putting across the corduroy anything could happen.

The first Club House, perched up on the hill, was a platform with a roof and a railing and always a considerable breeze blowing through. There was difficulty protecting the flame of the oil stove to get a kettle boiling but great communal social events were held there.

Country dancing had flourished with the natives but involved long distances to Lodge Halls. When the new Dunany Country Club House was built there was a floor big enough for squares in Dunany.

Dad loved Dunany. He had been a city boy and wasn o born gardener and nothing could have looked less related than did wearing his town hat and pushing a lawn mower, but the contact with the earth at Dunany was obviously a natural coming home feeling for him. Even an overnight up there would bring him home refreshed and recreated.

Much as the quiet and peacefulness spoke to him he enjoyed the storms. I remember him sitting out on the verandah while lightening tore the sky open and thunder crashed. He could not yell or scream or threaten but the elements could be applauded for their spontaneity .

Not only in my first impressions of Dunany did the McRobies assume great importance but all through my childhood. The children of the whole lake community went swimming at their beach and often were treated to hot chocolate and cookies. Golf with them was fun and walks were high adventures. So the day that Tom had a seizure and thereafter walked only with a few shuffling steps, changed Dunany. Flo and Tom never lost their good humour and kept attracting visitors but the high noon of life was past.

I took my fiance to meet them a few days before our wedding because they weren't equal to the trip down to Montreal for the wedding. We had supper together and talked about California and would the climate be too warm for some woollen blankets they wanted to give us for a gift. Maury helped Aunt Flo with the dishes and I visited with Uncle Tom as I had enjoyed doing as long as I could remember.

The sunsets which Aunt Flo and Uncle Tom enjoyed so much no longer reflect on their windows. Where the house stood there is a rock garden with bright nasturtiums in the summer.

The house my father built has gone too with its field-stone fireplace and walls of mellowed Douglas Fir. In its place is the living symbol of a new house and a new generation of Sutherlands.