

Nine Cities in Nineteen Days

OA Fakinlede

To Thee and to Thy Christ, O God,
We sing, we ever sing;
For He the lonely wine-press trod,
Our cup of joy to bring.
His glorious arm the strife maintained,
He marched in might from far;
His robes were with the vintage stained,
Red with the wine of war.

Anne Ross Cousin, 1876

They were the first nineteen days of June and I was flying high. So high that I only touched down, momentarily, in the cities of London (twice to change planes); Dallas (five days to play chess and holiday with a dear friend, Victor Olaniyi); Baltimore (thrice, and to visit my brother, Toye and his family in Olney Maryland); Minneapolis on my way to Edmonton (where I attended Ireti's graduation and had four tremendous days (with Lola also) to reunite and strengthen ourselves after the loss of Charity – a wife and mother for the storybooks); Toronto (to meet Francis Thomas McCrea), Ottawa (to attend a research meeting at the IDRC), Newark (to visit my brother Kayode and his family) and he drove me to Voorhees, NJ (where I was lovingly received by Sade Akanbi and my old friend, Biola that expertly husbands her) who also dropped me in Philadelphia to take the Greyhound bus to Frederick, MD (to meet Segun and Amechi Oloyede) and back to Olney for the homeward stretch!

Reti and Lola broke the bank and, often against my will, lodged me in the luxurious Coastal Edmonton Hotel downtown where we had meals at the city center mall, Boston Pizza, etc. and was introduced to new cuisines. They insisted that life must not always be about saving money! One remarkable occasion was in trying on three or four new shirts and trousers at the Winners' department store. I saw the price tag on this shirt reading 99 dollars! Immediately, I hated the shirt! I wonder why Ireti would want to spend such an amount on a shirt! Haba! Soon after removing it, I saw it has been discounted to 19 dollars on another tag I did not see when I wore it. Immediately, I loved the shirt! These children can never understand the economic realities that have governed my life and choices! We belong to different generations, different economic systems!

Yet there was more to our time in Edmonton than eating, drinking and shopping. For, Edmonton is the city of Robert and Dianne Priest! Dianne North was a volunteer nurse in Eastern Nigeria at the period leading to the Biafran War. When war broke out, the Canadians working in that area, along with most of the Western expatriates were given ample opportunity to cut and run. But 27 year old Dianne remained and reasoned that "I came to help this people before they had a war. Now that a war has started, they need me now more than they did before!" In my post graduate days in the city of Edmonton – more than 30 years ago, Dianne was a treasured sister and friend. When Charity and I married in

1982, She signed our register as family to us both! We have had long hours in Camps, biking and hiking trips and have known many lovely days over the years. I have been down to her den where all the photos of the Nigerian Civil War were kept in her house we all know as “The Igloo”. And, when Dianne tells you the story of the Biafra war – especially, of a man who came to the make-shift clinic behind the front lines, where she worked during the war, carrying his intestines with his hands, and, with little disinfectant, they used tailor’s needle to sew the poor man back to life, she would be fully in tears reliving those days!



Figure 1: L->R Ireti, Dianne, Lola, Coli

Dianne, no biological children of her own – married at 49 after spending the best time of her youth “compassing land and sea” for Christ sake, is mother, in situ, to Ireti and Lola as she has been over the years of their sojourn in Canada!

Dianne took me aside during this trip and wanted to know “how much of God” was in my present occupation in doing research that led to the need to meet the funders at the IDRC. Such a concern over my spiritual welfare, almost like a mother hen, has always characterized our relationship. More than that, Dianne gave me an update on several of our friends in Edmonton: Judge Phillip Ketchum, for example, died after battling Alzheimer’s disease and was faithfully cared for by a dutiful wife and family; Wolfgang Dyckerhoff, our Home Fellowship leader passed on shortly afterwards even though he still had the presence of mind to play his famous violoncello at Phillip’s funeral. There were several other stories and story-ending departures or sicknesses. One by one, people are leaving; seats, once filled, are now empty; the circle has certainly been broken, and we tearfully ask: “Will the circle be unbroken, by and by, by and by ...?”

Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
Bears all its sons away;
They fly forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the opening day.

The busy tribes of flesh and blood,
With all their cares and fears,
Are carried downwards by thy flood,
And lost in following years.

Like flowery fields the nations stand,
Pleased with the morning light;
The flowers beneath the mower's hand
Lie withering e'er 'tis night.

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be thou our guard while time shall last,
And our eternal home.

- Isaac Watts 1708

Daniel Egbune, my former student from Ilorin days was there to grace the occasion in Athabasca, Alberta. His loyalty and dedication especially in looking after Ireti and Lola goes far beyond anything he can still be claiming we may have done for him in his undergraduate days! Such is the sowing and reaping part of the famous parable. You reap in double or triple digits!

Monday night, June 11, Toronto, here I come!

British actor, author and comedian, Peter Ustinov, once described Toronto as "New York run by the Swiss". He meant that Toronto is a big city (like New York City), but that it's cleaner and more efficient. I spent five years, nearly forty years ago, living in Western Canada. Knew little of this city as I only changed flights at its airports since Canadian politics at that time did not allow me to even consider it as part of the country! Apart from living in Edmonton, I had seen Vancouver, Calgary and Saskatoon! Voila! What else is really left!

On June 12, 2018, I spent one tremendous day in Toronto! Boy, what a city! It was "totalita alita" as Dante (the Divine Comedy) would say, entirely otherwise. After buzzing downtown by way of the UP (Union station to Pearson international airport) train, in no time I was at the city hall. I was told to wait there by Brother Thomas, my principal (1966-1971) at St Joseph's College, Ondo. I saw the New city hall: an imposing complex, with its post-modern circular architecture and triple arches on top of a "thou shall not wade" shallow water pool supporting more than forty fountains in front of larger than life letterings of the city name guarded by the ubiquitous Maple Leaf of Canada.



Figure 2: New Toronto City Hall and the Fountains

You may be forgiven if this spectacular building, surrounded by Manhattan-like sky scrapers, made you overlook the old City Hall. Upon enquiry, I was asked to look to the right; and there it is in its majestic splendor, with all its 200 years of history, right next to the new complex. I arrived around ten o'clock and almost had the entire real estate to myself. As the clock ticked around twelve noon, I was beginning to need to fight to keep my standing space. City workers going on lunch break on this bright and sunny afternoon; tourists – mostly Asians (are these Chinese thinking of buying up the buildings like they did in Vancouver?), and several others representing virtually every color, shape and size of humanity gathered as if responding to some summons. Welcome to Toronto!

By this time, I saw a white old man, checking out a black man having his lunch, and, quietly, I whispered to his ears: "Brother Thomas, I suppose!". Despite my being one of his most troublesome students in St Joseph's, I was amazed that he not only could not remember me, neither did he recall my cousin, Folabi Longe (Uye Boy) who was one of the best-known footballers the school produced in the late 1950's, nor did he recall my older brother Kayode (SJC, 1962-1966). I kept on trying to wake his memory and at last, I asked about our teachers and he quite remembered people like Mr JR Ola – our geography teacher who came fresh with his degree from Indiana and made geography such a wonderful subject in those days. Thomas remembered the laborers like Emman that used to live behind the kitchen near that Carpenters shop and several of the other workers. Of course he remembered Abimbola Oladapo (senior Bimbi) and several other prefects.

Brother Thomas appeared in good health and was easily recognizable despite the interval of more than 45 years since I saw him last. And I had questions for him the answers to which I requested and was permitted to record on my phone. I wanted to know what became those valiant men who cared for us in those days of yore. They taught us not only regular school pedagogy but went into details such as basic hygiene, writing (remember Baba Leture)

prayers (I have not been able to improve on the “Bless us O Lord, and these thy gifts, ...”, before meals, or the “In manus tuas domine, comendo spiritu meum, ...” prayers to close the day, etc.). I reminded him of his speech to us in 1968 when the war was at its height and Ondo was threatened after the Ore battle (Oleku, Ija Ore) and he was not sure our compound would be safe! He remembered that! It took me these many years to realize how far Brother Thomas (under 35 years of age) and his colleagues were from their own home those days. Knowing how frightened I would be if my children, of a similar age were to be working in Afghanistan or Ukraine of today!



Figure 3: With Brother Francis Thomas McCrea

Francis Thomas McCrea came to Nigeria in 1960. He was 27 years of age and a graduate of the University of Windsor. By the time I came to St Joseph’s, he returned from a study leave for a Master’s degree at the famed Columbia University at New York to take the principalship of St Joseph’s in 1967. While he found it difficult to remember so many of us that I mentioned to him, he had no difficulty remembering his speech to us when hostilities of the civil war threatened to engulf the Township of Ondo and our school in 1968 as the Rebels fought the Ore battle. On the eve of our departure for holiday, Brother Thomas encouraged us to take all our belongings as we left for home while trying to assure us that he hoped things would not get so bad. Little it entered my 12-year-old mind that, here, standing before me, was a man with loved ones and family thousands of miles away in Canada! We only thought about ourselves!

Twenty seven years! Dianne North, Brother Thomas, 27! One a protestant missionary nurse and the other a Roman Catholic Priest. One, 1966, the other 1960. Both Canadians and Ontario natives at the time they made decision to serve the Christ by helping in Nigeria! Dianne is married now and settled into a comfortable retirement in Edmonton. Thomas, 86, is still so strong that he tired me out in a day long trek with trains, buses and walking in

beautiful and sunny Toronto. I was at the Brother's house and met Brother John – another member of the De la Salle Brothers who also taught us at St Joseph's college, Ondo.

I had a last question for Thomas: How did you reach the conclusion, at such an early age to spend your life in this way? His answer was not what I prepared to hear. While in High school, Thomas had met the De la Salle Brothers. The joys they exuded and the vigorous lives they lived showed him there was no better way to spend one's life! He did not see serving in Nigeria or Canada as a sacrifice at all! He saw it all as perhaps the best way to invest this gracious gift of life! At 86, still going strong!

The St Joseph's College of my secondary school days was on the outskirts of Ondo Town. It was essentially a *clearing in the jungle*. We saw snakes of all sizes, shapes and colors daily. I remember a student bringing his cache of more than 20 large snake eggs that we kept in the Chemistry lab until they started to hatch into live snakes! I also remember Josiah Akinnifesi, a fellow student, getting beaten by a snake one a regular school compound duty. It was sometimes scary. This led to my last question for Brother Thomas: "Given that you don't have that much contacts with snakes in your home country; were you not scared to be living among them in Ondo?" As before, I got a different answer than what I expected: "I went after them!". Brother Thomas, instead of being scared by snakes in Nigeria, became a snake hunter! To this day, there are only two encounters with snakes that I don't mind: Meeting them on the highway when I am protected by my vehicle and seeing them on TV!

Yes, O yes, I met many Nigerians during my trip. Most people I related to are doctors of one kind or another. Our conversation on Nigeria was usually about how terrible things have become and why the best thing to do was to find one's way to a land of opportunity such as Canada or Trumplandia.

Granted, upon arriving home on June 19, Lagos looked to me like a war zone. How do you explain the ordeal of getting out of the chaos of the roads out the airports? Or the potholes on the roads to the University via Iwaya? Should such loud and rude blaring of horns and uncontrolled rush to a standstill keep occurring in a nation at peace? What could be worse? Are my colleagues, who have been successful in Nigeria to win scholarships and fellowships and later bagging PhDs not correct in voting with their feet and opt out of this terrible place? Why should they waste their education looking for water, electricity, security and education for their children, etc.? What can be worse than the situation we are facing in Nigeria today?

The pre-independence and immediately post-independence Nigeria to which people like Brother Thomas, Miss North and several others came to run the missionary schools actually offered greater challenges than we face today. Many of these people were equipped with more modest educational accomplishments than some of us have. However, they were motivated by higher values and higher service and were not only able to thrive in the circumstances but were able to build workable models that created the educational opportunities that some of us have greatly benefitted from. I come from Akure. My late father had zero years of school education. Yet, the protestant and Catholic schools created by these people near our house gave opportunity to all the 13 children of my father and the

two of us that attended St Joseph's college went on to obtain PhDs in USA and Canada! The school compounds of those days were several things to each community: Community halls, Orchards with mangoes and several other fruits introduced into this land by missionaries, and playfields for local children! Every missionary primary and secondary school had these in different measures!

A single protestant Missionary, Miss Dyck, created the Nigerian Youth camp at Mile 20 on the old Lagos-Ibadan road. That camp was constructed with the local bamboos from the nearby Shagamu forest and the level of landscape architecture and design completely out of proportion to the non-technical educational background of late Miss Dyck! She went on to build other camps at Ogbomosho and Ilorin. The original camp has now been bought by the Four Square Gospel Church and their camp and university is constructed around its base.

Rather than ask if we should all run away and seek greener pastures, I think the pertinent question may be to ask, what is it in our education that makes us, no matter how many degrees we get, to be completely unequal to the task of developing our land and our people? Why cannot we survive where people, some of whom had less means or academic attainments thrived and created a business model that produced so many good results including us?

As I returned to Nigeria, these questions fill my mind. I felt that meeting Brother Thomas and Mrs Priest again, not only enhanced my journey, but made me ask: How shall I stand between these two witnesses when the story of my life is told. Luckily, I am a small child of 62, compared to them both!

"May Thy life and death supply
Grace to live and grace to die,
Grace to reach the home on high:
Hear us, holy Jesu. Amen" TB Pollock 1889