

## On 2017's Various Anniversaries

375 years since  
1642, Montreal's always  
Been *classy*, thanks *not* to chic Parisians,  
But to Normans, exchanging *Calvados*

For beaver pelts, vaunting a fashion cull  
That launched voyageurs portaging, camping,  
Fathering *Métis*—a “New World” people.  
210 years ago, ramping

Up the clamp down on the Transatlantic  
Slave Trade, Great Britain was, for once, truly  
“Great,” if also self-righteous and frantic  
To stop others from getting rich, duly,

By doing just as it had done, slaving  
Africans for centuries, enriching  
Itself *via* their forced labour, saving  
Much capital, until time for ditching

The *Crime-Against-Humanity* arrived.  
200 years back—1817—  
The Bank of Montreal was born, then thrived.  
Bring out confetti, champagne, and *poutine*!

150 years past, *Nation*  
Meant three colonies formed four provinces  
And one Dominion: Confederation  
Occurred because “Uncle Sam convinces

British North America there's a threat  
Of invasion, due to Britain's having  
Sided with Dixie in the War to set  
Free the slaves. Was Canada worth saving?

Yes, but as one union, not as a clutch  
Of jealously separate colonies!”  
100 years ago, against the *Deutsch*  
Speakers, Canada had shipped overseas

Troops to endure The-War-to-End-All-Wars  
And dump despotic monarchs. So, the Czar  
Fell, and the Bolsheviks forged, in due course,  
That first “Workers' State,” the U.S.S.R.

Home came “The Great War,” wrecking Halifax,  
Due to a munition ship’s explosion—  
That flattened the North End with gun and axe—  
Metaphorically. One saw corrosion,

Decapitation, mass devastation—  
Not unlike Vimy Ridge. Blinded, crippled,  
Survivors seemed a Zombie population,  
While snowy gusts, over charred ruins, rippled.

80 years ago saw Trans-Canada  
Airlines take wing, and keep flying under  
That name until the name Air Canada  
Was mandated in a law whose sponsor

Was Jean Chrétien (in 1964).  
70 years back, the Edinburgh Fringe  
Festival unfurled, while India, sure  
Of its future, took (the same does impinge

On Pakistan) its freedom. The Empire,  
British, soon contracts to a Commonwealth.  
60 years ago, Diefenbaker finds hire  
As P.M. His “Northern Vision” is stealth

Anti-Continentalism, as is  
The Canada Council for the Arts, launched  
In 57. Simultaneous,  
Ghana “gets its groove back”: *Liberty* staunched

Bloody *Exploitation*, or so theorized  
Nkrumah, anticipating Fanon’s  
*Wretched of the Earth*, the book that baptized  
*Freedom* won *via* machetes and guns.

50 years back, P.E. Trudeau insists,  
“Quebec’s place is in Canada, okay?!!”  
While in Vietnam, that “quagmire,” persists,  
Despite Yankee spectacles—the display

Of napalm flames roasting children’s bodies,  
So as to upset anyone touring  
Expo that year: Scarlet-tunic’d Mounties  
Couldn’t distract for long the sight of soaring

Bombers, in newsreels, surreal, igniting  
Grass villages with jellied gasoline.

The lesson of the Six Day War? *Fighting*  
Settles nothing; conquered terrain's serene

Until, inevitably, restless earth  
Quakes and shifts, disturbing the status quo,  
And maps prove shifty, or of shiftless worth,  
And sandy borders blur where drifts, winds, blow.

Four decades ago, New York's lights went out  
And rioters took to streets, as if the year  
Was 67 and the site Detroit  
And folks faced still either *War* or *Welfare*.

35 years past, *The Charter of Rights*  
*And Freedoms* coalesced, and P. Trudeau  
Dared to pirouette outside The Queen's sights,  
And then resign when stars vanished in snow.

30 years ago, the *Meech Lake Accord*  
Was signed, just as *The Charter* took effect;  
But the late document aroused discord,  
And that dissent urged on mass disconnect;

Then, Elijah Harper's upheld feather  
Registered Indigenous dissension,  
Which was not assuaged when, all together,  
First Ministers proposed *The Charlottetown*

*Accord*, 25 years ago. This time,  
Most Canadians said "Nyet!" Folks were  
Leery of lawyerly reason-or-rhyme,  
And weary of "wrangling" mangling grammar.

1997—or twenty years  
Ago—Diana, "The People's Princess,"  
Died. 5-billion eyes wept billions of tears,  
Worldwide; the paparazzi earned bad press;

And lost in that deluge was the news that  
Hardial Bains, of the C.P.C. (M-L),  
Had also perished a week before. But  
Few cared whether he hailed Heaven or Hell

In conceived afterlife; though, possibly,  
He and Diana—despite religious  
Differences—would've found cause to agree  
To dismantle landmines, insidious

As they are, brutal as they are, whether made  
By capitalists or communists, and  
Used by superpower armies, or brigade  
Of terrorists, or unabridged brigand....

10 years ago failed the Northern Rock bank,  
For “sub-prime mortgages”—panicking lenders,  
Making them scared to lend, bid them let tank  
The bank—and investors and pensioners—

As the first victims of what was soon dubbed  
The Global Liquidity Crisis, which  
Erased trillions in bubbled worth, and rubbed  
Out billions in troubled assets, but which

Only grazed Canucks, said economists,  
Thanks to “regulatory oversight,”  
That forbid bank mergers—in the 90s,  
When buying banks was tempting at first sight—

For “toxic assets” were quite invisible,  
But profitable—seemingly—for some,  
Even if risk proved unsound, criminal,  
And systemic bank-fraud the rank outcome.

Five years ago, The Queen celebrated  
Her Diamond Jubilee, and Obama  
Was President, and I was elated  
To be Laureate, not of Canada,

Not yet, but of Toronto, and to write  
Poems for City Hall, an escaped peacock,  
Even Good Government (!)—to share insight  
About governance, but also to knock—

Or mock—those moments when it’s in doubt.  
Look: A poet’s gotta make the comment!  
Had I known, five years back, I’d be out  
Of the Toronto post to join Parliament

Instead, as the 7<sup>th</sup> Parliamentary  
Poet Laureate, I’d’ve been ecstatic!  
To be a poet isn’t being statuary;  
It’s being loud, raucous, democratic!

I’m so glad I’ve had a chance to serve y’all—

The people—our people—my people—and  
Parliament. I hope you'll read and recall  
These poems, even decades hence, should they stand.

--**George Elliott Clarke**  
**7<sup>th</sup> Parliamentary Poet Laureate**