

Souvenirs & Mementos

The “Four Canadian Songs” took nearly half a century to become reality. It was in August 1971 that I wrote my first English-language art song—“Indian Summer.” The song endured several revisions, in 1975 and 1995, before achieving its final form in 2017. “Indian Summer” was a creative challenge suggested by my mother. That summer she had discovered 19th-century Canadian poetry and we both fell in love with William Wilfred Campbell’s singular lake lyrics.

In 1975, I conceived of a song cycle and started working on two more songs—“How One Winter Came” and “The Winter Lakes.” The irregularities of both texts confounded me for decades. Only by selectively regularizing the verses was I able to complete the second song in 1995, and the third one in 2017. To balance the form of the cycle, I added a fourth song in 1997—“How Spring Came.”

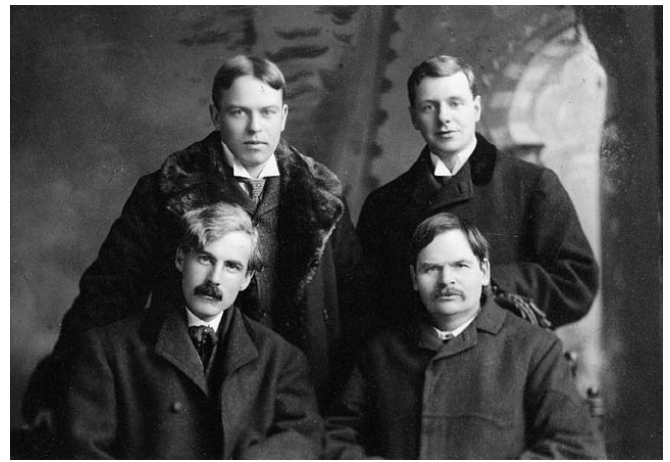
Campbell was a man of complex character, who lauded the British Empire, yet extolled the achievements of Scots in Canada, and believed in God so much that he lost faith in the Church... I wonder how he would have related to the son of Ukrainian immigrants who had the temerity to “improve” his texts?

Recently, on a brisk spring day (May 12, 2017), I had the opportunity of visiting Campbell’s grave in Beechwood Cemetery (Ottawa), and sitting on the bench-like granite gravestone erected by William Lyon Mackenzie King.

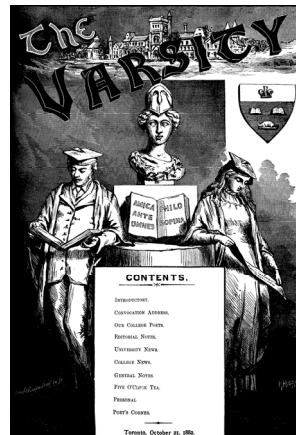
“Wilf!” I said. “Some day we shall meet on another plane of our existence and there discuss my songs. For now, I would have you know that I have written music worthy of your poetic genius.”

As the wind hissed in the pine above, I noticed a trillium growing at the base of the bench. Was this a sign for me to attend to Norman Gregor Guthrie’s “Red Trillium”—my second English-language art song? I walked over to Guthrie’s grave nearby and promised that I would.

In addition to being a belated wedding present for my wife, the song cycle is also a celebration of Canada’s 150th anniversary.



Standing: Prime Minister of Canada William Lyon Mackenzie King and lawyer Henry Arnold Burbidge; sitting: novelist Norman Duncan and poet William Wilfred Campbell (bottom right). The photo was published in 1905. Take a closer look at their coat collars. What a study in social rank! Notice how “modest” Campbell’s coat is in comparison to the coats of the other gentlemen.



Left: cover of the “The Varsity”, the University of Toronto student newspaper, which published “Indian Summer” for the first time October 21, 1882; right: my wife Nadia (née Burachok), to whom I have dedicated the songs as a belated wedding present. This 1998 portrait of her is by Ukrainian painter Volodymyr Vroniuk.





Jervis McEntee, *Indian Summer* (1862)

Indian Summer

On the eve of Canada's sesquicentennial celebrations, the "UC Review" called on all University College students, past and present, to submit their creations to this special issue. Since both William Wilfred Campbell and I had been enrolled at University College, and since "Indian Summer" had already been published at UofT in "The Varsity" in 1882, I believed my song would be a perfect fit—it was not. The editor explained, "We do not publish music." Funny, a musical fragment was included within a collage titled "A Change in Prescription." The fragment was Schumann's "Intermezzo" from his "Faschingsschwank aus Wien." Then someone-in-the-know volunteered that it was the word "Indian" in the title that got the song rejected—not PC (politically correct). Cancel culture had struck again!

So, is "Indian Summer" indeed one of those phrases to be avoided at all cost? Let us look at the history of the phrase. It originated in the New England states around the middle of the 19th century and refers to a warm spell in late autumn. What is noteworthy is that Campbell originally published his poem as "Autumn." It was only in 1889, after his stay in Cambridge, Massachusetts that the poem got its now famous title—"Indian Summer." Was it because the three writers who popularized this phrase (Longfellow, Howells, and Lowell) also resided in that city? The poet was acquainted with their work, if not the men themselves. Obviously, the phrase found favour with Campbell.

According to Longfellow's epic poem "The Song of Hiawatha," it was the Spirit of the North, Kabibonokka, who caused a warm spell to occur in late autumn—Indian Summer. In time, the phrase replaced other European names for this late summerlike period: grandma's summer, gypsy summer, aftersummer... As an expression, it has been used much in the United States, Britain, and Australia as a romantic title for works of art, literature, music, poetry, and even enterprise. Within Canadian culture the occurrence of this Americanism is not too widespread. And, Indian Summer has come to symbolize a time in the autumn of one's life when, briefly, one's youth is relived.



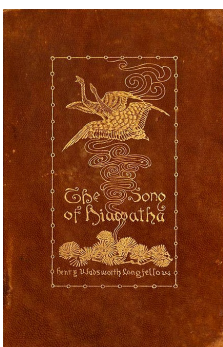
Petro Sydorenko, *Indian Summer* (1966)

In her 1950 Master's thesis, Canadian writer and literary scholar, Margaret Coulby Whitridge, considered Campbell's "Indian Summer" to be "...one of the most perfect Canadian poems ever written." Yet, the problem is with the word "Indian," even though there are no Indians in the poem itself—only a blue-jay and some wild birds, probably Canada Geese.

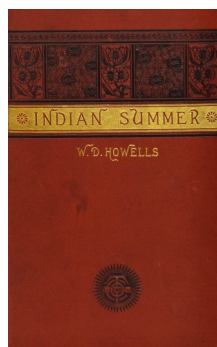
Back in 1971, when I wrote the song, there was a Ministry of Indian Affairs in Canada. It was renamed the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs only in 2011—40 years later! Then, in 2015, it became the Ministry of Indigenous and Northern Affairs.

I think that political correctness, applied retrospectively, ignores truth and prevents reconciliation as it creates a false narrative. Hopefully, the beauty of "Indian Summer" will transcend the politics of the day.

Longfellow (1855)



Howells (1886)



Lowell (1889)

