

Why I love Mount Pleasant, ‘the cem’ of the city

For the city’s great and good, the cemetery is a place of rest, but for me, it was a land of boyhood adventure and natural wonders

MARCUS GEE

OPINION



One of my favourite Toronto places is a graveyard. Mount Pleasant Cemetery is a park, arboretum, bird sanctuary and museum rolled into one. The least gloomy place imaginable, it throws open its gates to the living every day. Joggers, cyclists and walkers follow its winding roadways. Nature lovers admire its magnificent trees.

When I visit Mount Pleasant, I feel as if I am coming home.

My parents had a house that backed on “the cem,” as we kids called it. We climbed over the big grey wall to have dirt-bomb battles in the nursery or play hide-and-seek among the tombstones.

Our greatest thrill was fleeing the superintendent, who pursued us in a stubby red-and-white station wagon.

We never saw his face. We were running too hard.

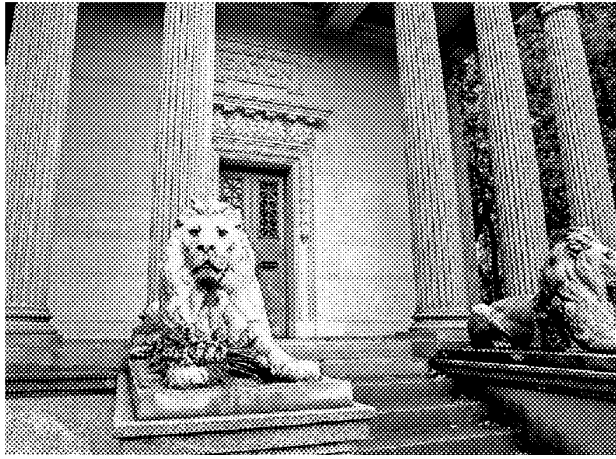
Much later, my mother had a place on Merton Street. She looked into the cem from her balcony. My parents’ grave lies in the grass five minutes walk from there.

Every spring I come back with my binoculars. Warblers and other migrants heading north after crossing Lake Ontario stop to fuel up on bugs before resuming their journey to the north woods. “Twitchers” like me prowl along the north wall, where the birds pause while they determine how to navigate around the Merton condos.

Some birds stop and stay. A family of red-tailed hawks was in residence this year. A young one could be seen perching on a granite gravestone one hot afternoon. Another day, a deer up from the neighbouring ravine grazed among the headstones a few steps from busy Yonge Street.

Mount Pleasant opened in 1876, when the Toronto Necropolis by the Don Valley started getting overcrowded.

Trustees bought a 200-acre farm on the east side of Yonge Street for \$20,000. The German-



Top: Pedestrians walk through Mount Pleasant Cemetery, which first opened in 1876. Many of the city’s well-known names can be found in the cemetery, including the Eatons, who have bronze lions guarding their tomb, seen left. PHOTOS BY CHRIS DONOVAN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

born architect Henry Engelhardt laid it out in the new “landscape” style, modelling his work on Boston’s Mount Auburn Cemetery. According to Mike Filey’s excellent history, Mount Pleasant was considered such a wonder that guide books urged visitors to hurry up for a look.

Ever since, it has been the place to be buried. Many of the city’s good and great lie there. The Eatons have bronze lions guarding their tomb. The grand pile that is the final resting place of the Masseys was designed by Edward James Lennox, architect of Casa Loma and Old City Hall. Mackenzie King lies next to his sainted mother, so he no longer needs to talk to her

through a medium.

I did a walk through the cemetery two or three times a week this summer. I passed the Masseys, the famous defence lawyer Greenspan (“The defence rests”), CBC broadcaster Knowlton Nash, business magnate Wallace McCain and the many soldiers of the Salvation Army who perished when the Empress of Ireland went down in the St. Lawrence on May 29, 1914.

Most of the names in the old part between Yonge and Mt. Pleasant streets are solidly Anglo-Saxon, as Toronto once was: Wilson, Smith, Goad, Wanless, Blackstock, Howard. Newer bits are more like today’s Toronto. In the plot over the wall from our old

house, Chow lies next to Simunic, Iannucci, Koutsaris and Nguyen.

Near the end of my walk, I passed the oldest graves in the place, a group of overgrown tablets transplanted from the Potter’s Field at Bloor and Yonge when the expanding village of Yorkville needed the land. On the way there I stopped to marvel at some of the trees, many of them with identifying labels nailed to the trunk: oaks, maples, copper beeches, horse chestnuts, tulips, catalpas, hornbeams.

If I am in love with trees, it is because of Mount Pleasant. Once, for a school project, I collected fall leaves from the cem and put them in a scrapbook with the names of the trees scrawled be-

side. If I am a nerd about Toronto history, climbing on those Eaton lions must have had something to do with it. If I sometimes put on a hat that embarrasses my children and stare at flitting birds, early birding trips to Mount Pleasant are part of the reason.

And if I like an adventure, it may be because of a hike I made to the cem with a friend when we were about 8. With lunches in our khaki backpacks, we travelled like National Geographic explorers to its furthest reaches, even the terra incognita through the Merton Street underpass, east of Mt. Pleasant Road. It struck me then as a mysterious, magical kind of place, another world in the heart of the city. It still does.

Reproduction with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.