



Powerful yet calming, a rush of water over a rift in the earth can entice, inspire, and frighten

WATER FALLS

By Antanas Sileika Photography Eamon Mac Mahon & Daniel Ehrenworth



Potts Falls, on a creek near Bracebridge, is not far from popular High Falls, on Muskoka River. Aubrey Falls (previous pages), on Mississagi River, north of Thessalon, Ont., measures 53 metres, almost as high as Niagara Falls.

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The first real-life fast water I saw up close was barely a waterfall at all, just a chute behind a dam on the Buck River near the hamlet of Ilfracombe, in central Ontario. But my 12-year-old heart sang out with recognition at the white foam, and soon six of us boys were riding the water down the fast, smooth chute, wearing out the seats of our bathing suits.

Any fast water is like that, and a waterfall even more so: attractive, exhilarating, and somewhat dangerous, especially if you're in a small boat and you can hear the cascade ahead of you.

A waterfall signals a dramatic shift in the life of a river from one level to another, a cathartic moment in an otherwise subtle flow. If landscape had ceremonies, a waterfall would signal a major transition—a birth, a marriage, a death—or maybe all three. A waterfall is landscape roaring at us: “Look at me! Something important is happening here!”

Almost a decade after I rode the Buck River chute, my neo-hippie friends and I were touring the province, bringing theatre to the children of cottage country in our version of a magic bus, a van stuffed with 11 young men and women in cut-off jeans and tie-dyed T-shirts.

When we saw the sign for High Falls, right off Hwy. 11 above Bracebridge, we parked and spilled out. The water was very low that August, so in our youthful heedless way, we walked across the top of the falls right at the lip, and then descended to the bottom using the dry centre between the two cascades. Exalted by the falling water, I forced my way through the cataract at the bottom to find a niche behind it. I could watch the torrent right in front of my nose before I burst back out through the head-slaming water.

“That was pretty dumb,” said one of the women with us.

“Why do you say that?”

“All it would have taken was a stick in the water to bash in the top of your head and kill you.”

She had a point. Cue the music that shows the protagonist recognizing his mortality for the first time in his life.

Those first two waterfalls were markers of my childhood and youth, but the waterfall of my middle age, and my favourite of them all, is Three Rock Chute, above the mouth of the Musquash River where it enters Georgian Bay.

Three Rock Chute is slightly remote and slightly mysterious. From the west, the chute is a natural barrier, stopping motorized traffic from heading upriver from Georgian Bay. From the east, it signals a precipitous end to a few kilometres of unspoiled river that feel primitive compared to the rest of cottage country, so much so that I have sometimes felt as if I were early thrown back in time on this stretch of water: The blue heron and beaver look at me dragging my canoe through the shallows as if seeing a human for the first time, and the minnows nudge my feet in an attempt to make me into a supersize dinner. >>



Here, the view from atop Moon Falls, on Moon River, south of Parry Sound, and only accessible by water. Previous pages, the misty veil of Hoggs Falls, on the Boyne River, near Flesherton, Ont.

there was once the village of Muskoka Mills, home to as many as 400 people until the last of three mills closed down in 1895. There is no building there now but an old house.

The mouth of the Musquash River is startling because it's filled with thousands of sawmill offcuts, the useless leftovers of the logs, lying like enormous scattered matchsticks in the shallow water. I once tried to climb out of a canoe at the shore nearby and stepped knee-deep into sawdust that felt as if it were trying to pull me down into the past.

It's not just the history and weird beauty of Three Rock Chute that appeals to me. I have personal reasons as well. My late father-in-law, Al Valiunas, loved the whole area so much that, 20 years ago, he helped us buy a cottage a few miles up from the waterfall.

He always said he would like to spend the last days of his life at the cottage, but that wasn't in the cards. Most of us exit life through hospital doors, and he was no exception. But his final wish was to have his ashes sent over the falls at Three Rock Chute. Last year, my wife, my two sons, and I fulfilled that wish and watched the grey mass of dust mix into the water, go over the falls, and disperse in the current that would make its way peacefully, first into the pool below the chute, and then into the waters of Georgian Bay.

It was a solemn moment for the remains of my sons' grandfather, but young people don't stay morose for long. They were fishing and swimming within the half-hour, and then my wife and I sat in the "gentlemen's position" at the centre of the canoe as the two paddled us home. After all, they're strong young men now, no longer boys. Three Rock Chute might just have marked the last transition for their grandfather, but it was only the first of many to come for them. ➤

Antanas Sileika's latest novel, Underground, will be published by Thomas Allen in 2011.

