**RICHARD ROBINSON’S UNCHRISTIAN CHRISTMAS**

--What madness rules in brainsick men!

*Henry IV*  William Shakespeare

--It is sin to rush into the secret house of death

Ere death dare come to us?

*Anthony and Cleopatra*

William Shakespeare

--Life, being weary of these worldly bars,

Never lacks the power to dismiss itself.

*Julius Caesar*

William Shakespeare

This short story did not begin as a Christmas tale, but the narrative unexpectedly ends astonishingly and assuredly with an authentic holiday twist.

Richard Robinson enrolled in my Seminar on the History of Geographic Thought at Michigan State University in Fall Quarter, 1970, along with 14 other Ph.D. students, in one of three required courses in the Department of Geography. He was an unusually good student, always prepared, eager to converse in class, and keen to expound his ideas, sometimes deemed contentious by other students. He could memorize a multitude of facts and recite them back on tests. His semester paper, a proposed research project, though well written, revealed a weakly stated objective, a dearth of appropriate reference citations to the extant geographic literature, and no conceptual or theoretical foundation for the contemplated research. His proffered research probe was a historical, demographic, and utterly descriptive account of the Pennyroyal Basin of western Kentucky, a region analytically researched several decades before by the reverend scholar Carl O. Sauer, founder of the venerable Berkeley School of Cultural Geography. Richard Robinson had not even cited Sauer.

This was slack, slipshod, and slapdash work from a doctoral student.

I gave him a B grade on the research paper. But—after much pensive contemplation—I gave him an A for the class based on his overall performance.

After I returned his lackluster B manuscript, he was quick to confront me in a somewhat forceful and perhaps even rude demeanor. He had always been exceedingly polite and differencial—perhaps excessively so—in all our previous engagements.

He demanded, “You’ll have to ‘elucidate’,” he said the word proudly and with grave emphasis, “the basis for this outrageous and unjustified grade. I’m a straight-A student.” Now he was staring me straight in the eye, leaning toward me, and he whined, “You know I deserve an A,” all 6 feet 4 inches, 230 pounds of him.

I explained in my most bland and tranquil manner that he had earned an A for the class grade, which seemed to mollify him slightly. He then turned to leave my office, glancing back at me as he was exiting the door and counter-blasted my kind conduct by shouting loudly, “I don’t kowtow to any professor. I’m no pantywaist!”

I was dumbfounded, astonished, and not a little piqued by Mr. Robinson’s audacious and blustering brusqueness.

I saw little of him after that during my last year at Michigan Sate University, before I was recruited for a faculty position at the University of Georgia in fall of 1971. I did see him a few times during the warming springtime weather in East Lansing, seated on a campus bench, reading what appeared from the paperback book cover to be X-rated, pornographic novels. He never looked up to see me.

I do recall Charles (White’) Kovasik, a graduate student at the time, telling me of an odd exchange he had with Richard Robinson. White’, now known as Chuck after his blond hair turned white and now a retired faculty member at the University of South Carolina, spoke to Mr. Robinson while passing in the hall, calling him “Dick.” Richard Robinson replied, “Don’t ever call me Dick. It’s Richard. Do you understand? Dick was my Daddy’s name.” White’ replied, “O.K. It’s Richard, right?”

It turns out that my unfortunate, one-time, relatively docile skirmish with Richard Robinson was mild compared with the intemperate, stringent, and sinister confrontation in store for professor Stanley Brunn, who gave Robinson a B grade in Quantitative Methods in geography for Spring Quarter 1971. Mr. Robinson engaged in an eyeball-to-eyeball face-off with the kind and caring Professor Brunn. Robinson demanded that the grade be changed, waving a change-of-grade form in professor Brunn’s face. Professor Brunn replied firmly but politely, “I will only change your grade if I made an arithmetic error in calculating it.”

Now Richard Robinson became even more infuriated and warned Professor Brunn, “I’m going to see Dr. Summers [the Geography Department chair] and he will change it to an A. Professor Brunn again resolutely replied, “He can’t change it, and he will not change it.”

Richard Robinson then escalated his menacing demeanor to a more ominous and intimidating level. He said diabolically, “I know where you live. Your wife and son will not be safe.” He had crossed the line by uttering a terroristic threat. As Robinson left the office, Professor Brunn called the campus police who picked him up just as he was leaving the Natural Science building, and they drove him to police headquarters.

Mr. Robinson was now congenial and mild-mannered. He denied making any threats, though he admitted being angry, and said he regretted anything he may have said in the heat of his confusion and exasperation. Professor Brunn went to consult with the department chair, also Mr. Robinson’s major professor. Dr, Summers convinced Professor Brunn to drop any charges. “I will councel him and exhort him to leave the program,” Dr. Summers promised.

At the next faculty meeting, the faculty voted unanimously to dismiss Richard Robinson from the Ph.D. program.

Robinson’s reaction was to declare that Michigan State’s doctoral program was third-rate and the faculty, especially Professor Brunn—who was a member of MENSA, the society comprising people with uncommonly high IQs—was stupid and incompetent.

Knowing that he was about to be “excused” from the doctoral program as he put it, Richard Robinson wrote a long and glowing letter, which I would have the opportunity to read a year later, to one Professor Merle C. Prunty, Jr., a distinguished scholar on the rural South and founder of the Geography Department at the University of Georgia. The letter pandered to Dr. Prunty’s ego, saying how much he wanted to study under the great master and faithfully follow with unswerving loyalty Dr. Prunty’s guidance and mentoring. Robinson respectfully piled it on lavishly.

Professor Prunty was exhilarated and notably puffed up by Robinson’s extravagantly praiseworthy depiction of Professor Prunty’s superlative scholarship.

Richard Robinson was of course admitted into Georgia’s Ph.D. program in Fall Quarter, 1971, the same time that I became a faculty member.

What a coincidence!

Richard Robinson’s matriculation was uneventful, as the recommendation letters from faculty at Michigan State University—not from me or Professor Brunn—purposefully neglected to mention Mr. Robinson’s troublesome times at the MSU geography department. They wanted him gone. The story simply was that he wanted to study with the renowned Professor Prunty. I remained mum. Give the guy a fresh chance, right?

The first time I encountered Richard Robinson—one-on-one—was early one morning in the third-floor men’s room. I naturally said, “How’s it going,” matter-of-factly.

I was so unprepared for Mr. Robinson’s gushing and effusively emotional reply that at firsdt I thought he was putting me on: “It’s so totally wonderful here. Dr. Prunty is a saint, a fabulous man, a real crackerjack of an advisor.” As I departed, I acknowledged that I was glad everything was working out.

Somehow, not everything was working out so wonderfully, however. He had a run-in with Professor Jim Fisher, no doubt the most humane, warmhearted, gracious, and considerate professor among the faculty.

The next time I saw Richard Robinson he was walking toward me in the hallway. He stopped abruptly and planted his body squarely in front of me. He said in an angry but self-confident voice, “You had better back off. I know Michigan State sent you down to spy on me and cause me trouble. I’m going to put a stop to this,” and this outburst occurring only a month after our brief but amicable bathroom chat. “I’m General McArthur to you and you should salute me,” he bellowed. I was prodigiously perplexed and the notion instantly became cemented in my mind that Richard Robinson was mentally demented and deranged. I walked away silently, having no reply to irrationality.

Following the imbroglio with Professor Fisher, a series of weird and bizarre incidents were being reported. In a faculty meeting, Professor James Shear, the department head, reported that Richard Robinson had returned a lab exercise to a female student with a marginal note that “You have pretty legs.” Professor Shear, a straight-laced, refined gentleman, sternly admonished Richard Robinson that “any repeat of that kind of behavior will result in your dismissal from the program. We can’t recommend anyone for an academic appointment who acts that way.” Richard Robinson’s reaction was apparently exceedingly contrite.

Jim Ingram, Director of the Cartographic Lab on the third floor, hired Richard Robinson for part-time work to render final drafts of maps and figures for faculty publications. After less than a week, Richard Robinson quit showing up for work. When contacted, he informed Jim Ingram that he would have no truck or association with such poorly designed faculty graphics and would not have his initials on them. But somehow he still demanded to be paid.

And then there was the alarming late Friday afternoon episode involving the campus police, the second police-summons occasion of which I later became aware, but not the last. Richard Robinson announced to five secretarial staff members—no one else being present—that he had guns in the trunk of his car and he was going to use them “this weekend” on people who were not Christians. Police found no guns in his vehicle and merely cited him for $25 for parking in a faculty lot.

Whoa, he was getting by with so much trash and illegalities and with so limited consequences.

Then he stepped on an academic landmine, the clincher.

He managed to become involved in a shouting match with Merle Prunty, who sometimes was affectionately known as the head of the Southern Geography Mafia. It was a career-ending blunder, as it was well known among those who knew Merle Prunty that, to quote his own words, “When I go after a man, I cut his guts out!”

Richard Robinson quickly found himself figuratively inviscerated.

A special faculty meeting was called for the single expressed purpose of throwing Richard Robinson out of the program. Merle Prunty, his erstwhile major professor, was in a nasty and agitated mood. Professor Woodruff, outwardly jocular in seeing Professor Prunty, his longtime nemesis, so taut-faced and wrought-up by the brazen effrontery of a mere student, knew where and how to goad Professor Prunty. Merle Prunty angrily and predictably reacted, storming out of the faculty meeting, which was called for the sole purpose of the Prunty dismissal motion, saying, “I don’t have to take that.” Silence filled the room, except for Professor Woodruff’s slight guffawed chuckle.

After a few minutes upon gaining his composure, Professor Prunty seriously and somberly reentered the room, announced his anticipated motion, quickly seconded by several others. The motion to oust Mr. Robinson was unanimous.

The Robinson affair was hardly over, however. He appealed it to the dean, Dean John Stephens, to provost William Peltier, to president Fred Davidson, and, gaining no satisfaction, to the Board of Regents. I accompanied Dean Stephens, Professor James Shear (our department head), and Professor Prunty to the regents Board meeting in Atlanta in my role as graduate coordinator. The chair of the Board of Regents did not even call on me to testify, being the youngest and least important member of the Georgia throng, younger in fact than the haughtily punctilious Richard Robinson. He wore a large, heavy metal cross around his neck as he sat rigid with back straight.

Mr. Robinson’s grandiose and swaggering exhibition came to naught, as the Regents upheld his termination from our program.

*Postscript:*

We later learned that he enrolled in the School of divinity at Emory University in Atlanta and became an even more devout Christian.

Richard Robinson’s name next surfaced in a short news column in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution.* Mr. Robinson had gone public about three School of Divinity professors whom he accused of not being practicing Christians and who held heretical views, divulged in the classroom no less.

These alleged unorthodox beliefs became so displeasing and disturbing that Richard Robinson personally confronted the three professors and terrorized and stalked them. They called the police who placed the now-ranting and energetically raving Richard Robinson in jail.

Such a debasement to Richard Robinson’s aggrandized ego was intolerable, particularly at the end of his academically unsuccessful first quarter at Emory and with Christmas coming on no less. He knew his bold action certainly would merit national news. He had often thought about it during his many sullen and dejected moments.

Lights, camera, action! Richard Robinson swallowed his long-concealed and always indispensable poisonous cyanide pocket companion, even though suicide is a Christian sin. Perhaps his old dad, now living in Heaven, just next door to Jesus Christ, would now accept him.

*Finis* and Happy holidays!