

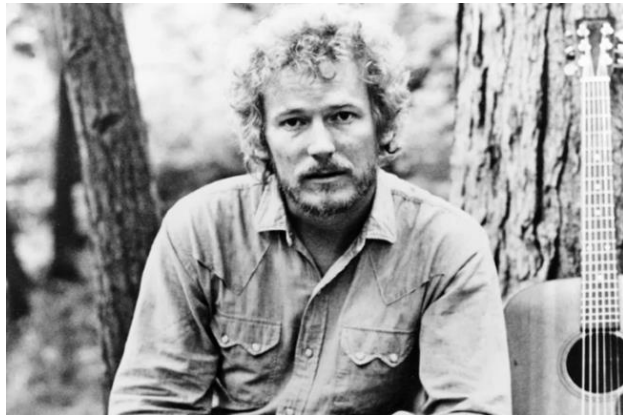
# JEFFERSON

EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Quick, Timely Reads  
On the Waterfront

## Sad News Follows Me to California *Gordon Lightfoot*

By David Frew  
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*A youthful Gordon Lightfoot, poet and troubadour*

During April and May, my wife Mary Ann and I embarked upon a grand western tour of children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. Leaving from my daughter's home near Chicago we flew to Portland, Oregon to see my grandson and his young son, drove down the Pacific Coast Highway from Oregon to California, and stopped at Sam Ramon, where my son and his two children live.

Extended trips such as this don't interrupt my work. I carried projects with me and as I do when in Erie, woke up early each day to write for a few hours and check email messages.

On Tuesday, May 1 my inbox "lit up" with notes about the passing of Gordon Lightfoot. Most of the messages were from Port Dover, Ontario friends who know my affection for their Ontario, superstar neighbor. Lightfoot was born and lived in Orillia, Ontario, a lovely town almost due north of Erie and on the Trent-Severn Canal between Lake Ontario and the Georgian Bay. His life near the Georgian Bay informed his maritime focus and made him into a sailor. And his childhood in a small town helped him to become a practical person who saw life from a working man's perspective.

One of my first Jefferson essays included Gordon Lightfoot. It was the 45th anniversary of the sinking of the Edmund Fitzgerald, and I approached that essay from the perspective of its importance as a Great Lakes shipwreck. At the time Lightfoot's song instantly brought Great Lakes shipping and shipwrecks into prominence, making millions of people aware of the maritime importance of the entire region.

I first saw him perform long before he had attained fame or notoriety, in a small Ohio venue during the 1960s. He took the stage by himself with a 12-string guitar and played for almost two hours, demonstrating almost unbelievable skill. He switched between flat picking and finger picking as he performed his own songs, and I was amazed by his instrumental prowess as well as his lyrics. As his fame increased, he moved to Los Angeles, but was never comfortable away from his home in Ontario.



*Downtown Orillia, Ontario*

Lightfoot was a child prodigy, performing in church choirs and playing the piano, his first instrument. He was also a gifted athlete. After a high school career that included his football team winning the Ontario regional championship with

Gordon playing nose tackle, he earned an athletic scholarship to attend McGill University in Hamilton, Ontario. Lightfoot, the university student, was formally trained in music at McGill and it was there that that he drifted from piano to guitar and received classical training. While he was comfortable performing, his early career was primarily focused upon writing. His songs were picked up and performed by both Canadian and American artists. Few writers have been as widely “covered” as Lightfoot, a phenomenon that continued well after he began successfully recording his own songs. Among the many artists who helped to make his songs famous were Joan Baez, Cher, Judy Collins, Bruce Cockburn, Bob Dylan, The Kingston Trio, K.D. Lang, Peter, Paul and Mary, Marty Robbins, Elvis Presley, Ian and Sylvia Tyson, and Neil Young.

On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Canadian Confederation (1967), Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) commissioned him to write a folk song that would highlight the history of the country. With a stipend that had been provided by the Canadian National (CN) Railroad, Lightfoot created a revolutionary piece of music titled the “Canadian Railroad Trilogy.” Recognized by musical scholars as one of Lightfoot’s greatest works, it never reached the popularity of his other popular songs because of its ambitious scope and its length. The original score is seven minutes long. In it, Lightfoot narrates the history of Canada from the perspective of its transcontinental railroad tracks, creating a three-part opera in which he shifts tone and pace as he describes the laying of the tracks from east to west and the creation of the Canadian Pacific Railroad. The Railroad Trilogy has been described as revolutionary.

While that may be Lightfoot’s most unique song three others have distinguished themselves as his most popular and beloved: “If You Could Read My Mind,” “Sundown,” and “Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald.” Each features brilliant lyrics, unique chord structures and astonishing musicianship. Lightfoot has always served as musical director of his band, orchestrating not only his own lead guitar parts but the bass, drums, keyboard and second guitar parts. In his characteristically generous approach to live playing, Lightfoot walks away from center stage when the back-up guitar is being featured. Of all his songs, the most positive response has always been to “If You Could Read My Mind,” a song that he wrote when he was in the midst of a divorce.

*‘If you could read my mind, love  
what a tale my thoughts would tell.  
Just like a tale from an old-time movie  
’bout a ghost from a wishing well.  
In a castle dark or a fortress strong  
with chains upon my feet. ...’*

— Gordon Lightfoot, “If You Could Read My Mind”

Lightfoot had two near-death experiences, an aneurysm and a stroke. His recovery from those health scares helped him to appreciate life and to rededicate himself to healthy living. He stopped drinking and using recreational drugs, began a dedicated exercise program and lost weight. He also continued touring extensively, until the end. He always said that live music is the most important part of his work.



*Gordon Lightfoot's sailboat, Golden Goose, on the Georgian Bay*

In addition to seeing Lightfoot live on several occasions I met him while sailing. I was at Tobermory, Ontario about 20 years ago tied to the main pier for the evening when a man on the bow of a large wooden sailboat asked for assistance in docking. As he tossed me a bow line, I immediately recognized the arriving sailor: it was Gordon Lightfoot. Tobermory is on the Georgian Bay, not far from Lightfoot's home port of Orillia.

Erie has been a regular stop for Lightfoot. He has played the downtown Warner Theatre as well as Chautauqua Institution. My mind has been playing Lightfoot songs almost constantly since he passed away. I will miss him.



*Older, wiser and more spiritually evolved, Gordon with his signature 12-String guitar*

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.*



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