

Australian- Canadian Studies

A Journal for the Humanities and the Social Sciences

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Cover:

Still from *Black Robe*



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NORTHROP FRYE

14 JULY 1912 — 22 JANUARY 1991



"A public that tries to do without criticism, and asserts that it knows what it wants or likes, brutalizes the arts and loses its cultural memory."

Anatomy of Criticism (1957)

Photograph:
Roy Nicholls

NORTHROP FRYE THE CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF CANADA

INTRODUCTION

The following address was given by Professor Northrop Frye at Hart House, the University of Toronto, on 17 October 1990, on the occasion of the meeting of the Council and Staff of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. This was the last formal address he gave at the University. Professor Frye died on 22 January 1991.

In the words of James F. Keffer, Vice-President — Research, University of Toronto and Ann Saddlemyer, Master, Massey College, this essay represents "both a warning and a challenge to all who are concerned with graduate education and research in Canada". Professor Frye's "stimulating and timely comments on Canada's cultural past and his hopes for the future" deserve a wide audience.

The editors would like to thank those named above, and Mrs Jane Widdicombe, Executrix to the Estate of Professor Frye, for making this document available to our readers.

THE CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF CANADA

Canada has had a far less bloody and violent history than most countries, but Canadians have lived through as much history as any other nation, and the pattern of that history is closely related to events everywhere else in the world. The pivot around which our history turns is, of course, the confederation of 1867, which was a romantic and imperialistic idea, consolidating into a nation a group of British-

controlled colonies and territories. In many respects it was by no means an ignoble idea, and the documents leading up to it, such as the Quebec Act and the Durham Report, were, by the standards of their time, based on sane and balanced conceptions.

The main thing wrong with Confederation was its impoverished cultural basis. It was thought of, however unconsciously, as a British colony and a Tory counterpart of the United States, with French and indigenous groups forming picturesque variations in the background. Treaties were made with the indigenous people, but as it was widely assumed that they would soon become extinct or assimilated it made little difference what the treaties said. Students of my generation were taught in school to sing "The Maple Leaf Forever", which almost attained the status of a national anthem in English Canada, though its attitude to British imperialism sounds pathetic enough in 1990.

There are, as I see it, three aspects of the word culture. First, there is culture as a life-style, shown by the way a society eats, drinks, clothes itself, and carries on its normal social rituals. The British pub and the French bistro represent a cultural difference in life-style of this sort. Second, there is culture as a shared heritage of historical memories and customs, carried out mainly through a common language. Third, there is culture in the shape of what is genuinely created in a society: its literature, music, architecture, science, scholarship, and applied arts. In the years following confederation, Canada could hardly be said to have had a culture in any of these areas. There was no distinctively Canadian life-style: there was some sense of a common tradition in French Canada, but not much elsewhere; the arts and sciences were minor and provincial. On the Mercator maps usually studied in school, Canada was a huge land mass extending to the ends of the earth, full of rivers, lakes and islands that few Canadians had ever seen; the inhabited part of the country looked only like what the United States had left, a country longer and more divided than Chile. To make a nation out of the stops on the Intercolonial and Canadian Pacific lines seemed as chimerical a notion as building an African civilization on a Cape-to-Cairo railway.

In the eighteenth century the French lost Canada largely because they had no interest in holding it: they sold Louisiana to the United States a few years later, and that probably indicates what the fate of a French Canada would have been. With no social structure left of its own, French Canada fell under the control of the Catholic Church, which was profoundly alienated by the atheistic and anti-clerical French Revolution. As for the British, once they succeeded in occupying Canada their interest in it remained lukewarm, and Canadians in

England constantly felt that they would have been regarded with more respect if they had belonged to an independent nation like the United States. The pioneering literature of the nineteenth century continually conveys the feeling that Canada was a kind of non-criminal penal colony, designed for remittance men and Irish housemaids. The Americans made two attempts to occupy the country by military force, both of them beaten off, but violence and the threat of violence continued in the Fenian raids and such things as the "fifty-four-forty-or-fight" crisis. They then tried economic penetration, in which they were brilliantly successful. Why go to the trouble of annexing a country that is so easy to exploit without taking any responsibility for it? A society valued mainly for its beaver pelts, its softwood forest, and the soldiers it can supply for other countries' wars, is unlikely to develop any cultural phenomena beyond a problem of identity, a general state of wondering why it exists.

Part two of this history begins with the close of the Second World War. Up to 1945 immigration from countries other than the United Kingdom had been largely rural-based. But now an urbanized immigration started pouring into the larger cities: half a dozen large ethnic groups appeared in Toronto, which up till then was mainly a WASP reservation. French Canada went through a secularizing "quiet revolution" that deprived the Catholic Church of most of its political influence, and gave Quebec a new sense of status. The indigenous people showed a strong prejudice against extinction or assimilation, and began to develop a new professional class, including lawyers, to examine such questions as whether building a golf course across land previously guaranteed to them was really in the spirit of that agreement. Meanwhile Canada had ceased to be a British colony and had become effectively an American one, which made at least more geographical sense in a post-naval world. In the sixties many American students opposed to the Vietnam draft discovered that Canada was not merely an insulation of ice against the Soviet Union but was an actual country that could be lived in.

All these developments created a cultural imbalance that exploded in the crisis of the Meech Lake controversy in 1990 and continued in the Oka confrontation a few weeks later. I am not competent to discuss the incidental problems involved here. But I feel that directly in front of us lies a primary need for what I shall call Reconfederation, and which I think of essentially as providing a cultural skeleton for the country that fits its present conditions. Without a cultural Reconfederation there can be only continued political tinkering of the most futile kind. True, I

think the best political context by far for Reconfederation is a renewed political Confederation, which means abandoning all the jockeying for power that proposes trade barriers or separate currencies. I hope that the greatest of all political forces, inertia, will manifest its majestic power here.

A political entity, in any case, is not a cultural one. French-speaking Canada is a cultural reality of the highest importance: "Quebec" is a province like other provinces, and always will be; the more separatist its policies, the more inevitably provincial their characteristics. Such pedantic fatuities as outlawing English signs on the outsides of buildings are typical of the way that the political mind works when dealing with a cultural problem. A distinct society can be only a cultural unit where a language is spoken and a culture fostered by those genuinely interested in it for its own sake, and such societies are the only possible architects of a reconfederated Canada. Quebec had been an architect of Confederation in 1867, and it has no higher destiny now than to become an architect of Reconfederation on a renewed cultural basis.

It is a curious law, or seems to be one, that a neglected or oppressed culture will sooner or later fulfil itself. No culture could have been more submerged than that of black America in the nineteenth century, yet it was that culture whose jazz transformed the music first of America and then of the world. Similarly, the Inuit peoples of the north turned out to have astonishing resources of highly prized creative abilities in sculpture and painting; something very similar has happened with the Indian people, and after the quiet revolution French-speaking Canada began to develop a poetry and fiction of extraordinary intensity and power. Finally, English Canada, the land nobody wanted, the land that seemed unable to communicate except by railways and bridges, began, from about 1960 on, to produce a literature of a scope and integrity admired the world over. Not that such things take place simply as mysteries or miracles. Canada cannot afford private universities, and must have subsidies in all areas related to scholarship and creativity, and without the present organization and the Canada Council earlier none of this would have happened.

The Meech Lake conference was so administratively clumsy in its set-up that it was certain to fail, and the main issue involved was, as just explained, partly an illusory one. What was amazing about the conference was that it very nearly succeeded, and of the two final roadblocks one had nothing to do with the "distinct society" issue at all. The Québécois were told by their leaders to interpret the Meech Lake débâcle as a rejection of their special status by English Canada, but I

think it represented the exact opposite: a sense of urgency about the cultural renovation of the country, of which the distinct society clause was at least a symbol. It was a curious irony that Quebec found a sovereignty-association issue of its own on its doorstep a few weeks later. I am aware how many qualifications are involved here, but both crises were nearly hysterical by Canadian standards, which they would not have been, I think, if they had been concerned with cultural realities instead of political fictions.

The bilingual program emphasized in the Trudeau era seems to me on the whole a sensible and pragmatic policy, and its general shape will doubtless remain in place for some time. The unwillingness of speakers of a majority language to learn a minority one certainly exists, but is by no means confined to Canada, and, apart from an occasional foolish demonstration, English Canada's tolerance has been remarkable. Flemish is not, to put it mildly, popular in French-speaking Belgium; Irish, whatever the sentiments behind it, is not really popular in Ireland; and the immense social pressure on French Canadians to speak English is part of a North American situation, in fact of a world situation, that affects Norway and Pakistan as much as it affects Quebec. The spearhead of invasion of English into Quebec does not come from English Canada but from American television. Meanwhile the language and culture of French Canada is in flourishing shape, in no danger except when politicians refuse to leave it alone. Culture and language are an area — perhaps the only area — where privatization really does work.

The variety of ethnical mix in the bigger Canadian cities brought the buzzword "multiculturalism" into the foreground, and a variety of problems with it. An Anglo-French bilingualism seems more problematic in a city where, as in Toronto, the Italian-speaking population is eight to ten times greater than the French one. Behind this lies the contemporary geographical situation of Canada, which is no longer at the ends of the earth but in the centre of all the great powers, the United States on the south, the Soviet Union on the north, Japan and eventually China on the west, and the European common market on the east. Two of these, the Soviet Union and Europe, are in the process of becoming primarily cultural federations. Like Switzerland in nineteenth-century Europe, Canada must now preserve its identity by having many identities.

May I revert for a moment to my conception of three aspects of culture, as a life-style, as a shared heritage, and as the pursuit of scholarship, the sciences, and the creative arts. There is hardly a

distinctive Canadian cultural life–style, which has been largely identical with that of northern United States for a long time. This in turn has been part of the general homogenizing of life–styles everywhere. In Canada we say, or have said, that we are being Americanized; but America itself has become Americanized in the same way, and the original contrasts in, say, Philadelphia, St Louis and Atlanta have long since been largely obliterated.

The process here is that of the growing uniformity of technology, in which Americans have naturally had a leading role. We cannot take off in a jet plane and expect a radically different way of life in the place where the plane lands. Uniformity of standards and measurements is of course essential in all technological or mechanical areas: in other aspects of human life we seek a unity of coalescence of various things. Unity, which always possesses a quality of uniqueness, is the opposite of uniformity, where there is only likeness or similarity.

As for culture in the sense of a shared heritage, this is an outgrowth of a provincial stage where there is a sense of only one community. As the provincial grows into the genuinely cultural, the conflicts of the past become the positive elements of a common experience. *Je me souviens* is an ambiguous motto: everything depends on what one is expected to remember. If it means preserving the continuity of a cultural tradition within a larger context, it is a basic principle of human dignity; if it means brooding on suppressed resentments in the past, it is quixotic nonsense. In contrast to the United States and France, which began with revolution and the deductive approach to unity that a revolution inculcates, Canada has had a history of compromise and *ad hoc* agreements, with a fairly constant attempt, whatever the lapses, to preserve the rights of both sides. At any rate, Canada seems to impress non–Canadians as a moderate and reasonable country, potentially as happy a country to live in as the world affords. It is a peculiarly poignant irony that Canada should reach such a point when its political leadership seems to have been attacked by an epidemic of Alzheimer’s disease.

The twentieth century has been mainly a period of war and tyranny; these are evil things, and there is always something unreal about evil, not for the victims, unfortunately, but in the sense of disappearing from history with no structure left behind. Nothing has improved in this century except science and scholarship, which have improved because they have no boundaries. If they do have boundaries, in other words if they are politically controlled, they soon become sinister and dangerous. And just as only science and scholarship have improved, so nothing has

remained stable except the arts, including the arts of language. These do have boundaries: poetry and fiction particularly are usually limited to a very specific locale. But they are infinitely porous boundaries, open to influences from anywhere in the world. The prominence of Zola, Erasmus, Disraeli and Mill in Canadian humanist scholarship may have started accidentally through the presence of qualified scholars here, but they represent a Canadian presence in world culture, and are part of the only contribution we can make to the world that the world is likely to have much permanent respect for.

Sometimes the influence is from the same country. There are many poets and novelists in Canada of white ethnical origin who think of themselves as cultural descendants of indigenous people and helping to carry on their traditions. It is sometimes said that, for example, whites should not write about blacks or Gentiles about Jews, but that is only froth on the surface of controversy. The more vigorous the literature, the more it thrives on cross–pollenization. One thinks of Yeats and his dependence on a Celtic and Irish mythological tradition of which he knew next to nothing at first hand. A different type of cross–pollenization occurs when a Canadian writer has a Japanese or Caribbean or Czech or Sri Lankan background.

A few weeks ago I was in Yugoslavia, travelling by train from Zagreb in Croatia to Ljubljana in Slovenia. The journey was about as far as from Toronto to Kingston, but when I got off the train I was in a different country which spoke a quite different language. For seventy years this tiny land–locked community had been a rather down–graded part of Yugoslavia, and for centuries before that an even more down–graded part of the Austrian empire. And why was I in Ljubljana? Because the university there had decided to open a school of Canadian studies. I thought to myself that this is typical of what a culture is: it is the indestructible core of a human society, so far as it is a human society and not a mere aggregate of atoms in a human mass. Such a culture can resist century after century of invasion, conquest, infiltration and neglect; yet it remains open to influences and experiences from anywhere in the world, even Canada.

The institutions of culture, museums, art galleries, and above all universities, reflect this boundary–without–walls aspect of culture in their combination of local and world–wide interests. Cultural institutions are educational as well, because what I have been calling culture is the social manifestation of the educational system. It is not only the present audience, but a rapidly increasing number of concerned Canadians, who realize that Canadian educational standards are far

below what they ought to be. This question has been discussed endlessly: I have only one point to make here about it.

A very central and important aspect of education, and probably the part that stays with us longest, is what comes, not from what we are taught or read, but from what we learn from one another. The more homogeneous and provincial the community, the more of what we learn in this way is simply the repeated prejudices of our friends, backed up by similar repetitions in the news media. Canada has now become cosmopolitan to a degree that would have been incomprehensible fifty years ago. If Toronto is a world-class city, it is not because it bids for the Olympics or builds follies like the Skydome, but because of the tolerated variety of the people in its streets.

Society must have loyalty, but in a democracy there are no uncritical loyalties. There must always be a tension of loyalties, not in the sense of opposed forces pulling apart, but in the sense of one feeling of belonging attached to and complemented by another, which is very often the relating of a smaller ethnical community to a larger one. It is through some such process as this that the cultural development of Canada must make its way.