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editorial

One of the ongoing dilemmas in the area of comparative studies is working with that thorny category 'nation' which is inescapably embedded in the logic of cross-national comparison. Although it is by no means the case that working in the parameters of the national is necessarily nationalist, the constant need to invoke the terms 'Canadian', 'Australian' and 'New Zealand' shows that these issues can be ignored only at our peril. The way these normative and methodological concerns interact in the contributions to this issue illustrates the dimensions of these perennial dilemmas in Australian/Canadian/New Zealand studies. There is an awareness in these articles not only of the problems associated with a narrow focus on the national but also of the productive role of comparative perspectives in addressing these problems.

The problems of speaking in terms of national categories are examined from a feminist perspective by Gillian Whitlock in *Taking Issue*. She argues that the 'Canadian' and the 'Australian' is frequently synonymous with a masculine perspective and that women in particular, in the tradition of Virginia Woolf, are unreliable citizens of national constructs. Not only gender but also race, ethnic, class and regional differences produce fault lines which fragment national identities. In his review essay of Gerald Friesen's monumental history of the prairies, Donald DeBats examines the justifications for regional histories and the argument that nations are best understood as the sum of their parts. Regional histories force a disaggregation of the national experience but promise a useful level of aggregation between the idiosyncratic nature of individual experience and the often unwieldy category of the national. DeBats assesses Friesen's achievement against this ideal.

Shirley Neuman's consideration of critical approaches to nineteenth century women authors also highlights the problems of working with the national. She examines the multiple distortions which can occur when this body of literary texts are read deterministically in terms of national thematics. Neuman argues that in their approaches to nineteenth century literature in particular, Canadian critics have found it difficult to move outside of nationalist thematics. She locates this preoccupation with national literary identity as the product of a post-Confederation, middle-class, anglophone national pride which is particularly inappropriate to analyses of pre-Confederation literature. And yet the critic is caught in a double bind for, as inappropriate as the category 'Canadian' may be for many nineteenth century writings by women, to read 'minus Canadian' would be not to read many of these early texts at all. Neuman argues that critics need to be more aware of how the national literature has been constructed and, in general, to be self conscious and quite specific about how and why a text produces meaning. In this way an authoritarian and fixed notion of

'Canadianness' can be avoided and the critic's role in producing meaning as well as discovering it can be openly acknowledged.

The articles by Wilson and Boire also work outside of national categories, although in quite different ways. From different starting points each places his analysis in an international rather than a national context. In his analysis of understandings of postmodernism in Australia and Canada Robert Wilson considers the very different intertextual fields which operate around and internationalise a single text, Robert Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said*. So both postmodernism and postcolonialism take literary texts beyond what Wilson sees as the confines of the region and the nation into an international space. In his article Gary Boire examines prison theatre in Australia, Canada and New Zealand as a distinctively postcolonial form. His extended analysis is a good example of how the postcolonial critical approach charts a geography which moves beyond the nation into a wider framework of colony and empire. Boire's approach is particularly interesting because he translates what is so often taken as a characteristically Australian preoccupation into the wider dynamics of responses to colonisation and imperial control.

The dilemmas of dealing with the national appear in parallel ways in the historical and political contributions in this issue. Jeremy Mouat's article is the most explicitly cross-national of these dealing with the history of mining communities in Australia, Canada and New Zealand. Mouat uses these three historical comparisons to critically evaluate global, regional or national and local explanations of the militancy and radicalism of these mining communities. In his view a global explanation which looks at the common nature of work in all three settings is the most persuasive. However he then goes on to demonstrate how a comparative approach allows the global explanations to be significantly enriched and expanded. In particular he notes that the international conditions determined by markets and technology lead to a parallel and significant restructuring of work in all three communities around the turn of the century. In this example of cross-national comparison, therefore, the national is utilised for a global or international comparative project.

The other two political/historical contributions in this issue tend to affirm the utility of an institutional approach, although they locate their concerns in the context of a 'new institutionalism' rather than the old institutionalism of 'nation-building within the British Empire'. John Wanna's review of Grace Skogstad and William Coleman's empirical studies of business-government relations in Canada locates their work in the context of important international debates about interest group representation and corporatism generated by comparative politics. Here again, common or 'global' explanations can be enriched by comparative study.

Don Beer's article analysing recent debates on self-government in British North America engages directly with what he describes as 'the gold-rush toward new themes' of region, class and gender in Canadian historiography that displaced the old political topics of imperial historiography. But the exploration of Canada's 'limited identities' now allows for a new approach to these older themes and has

encouraged historians to reexamine larger historical perspectives through the analysis of key periods. Beer guides us through recent debates on responsible government to see how this is done in this area of historical debate. If successful, it may constitute a new and useful critical approach to the old questions about the dynamics of nation-building in Canada.

Comparative study raises important normative and methodological issues within each discipline. The parallels are probably more discernible to the outsider than the writers. One of the pleasures of editing *Australian-Canadian Studies* is having the vantage point to observe these parallels. Within the context of a single discipline it is often difficult to convince others of the interest of findings generated by comparative study. The task of an interdisciplinary journal like this is to draw attention to these parallels across the disciplines and, hopefully, to foster their further development.