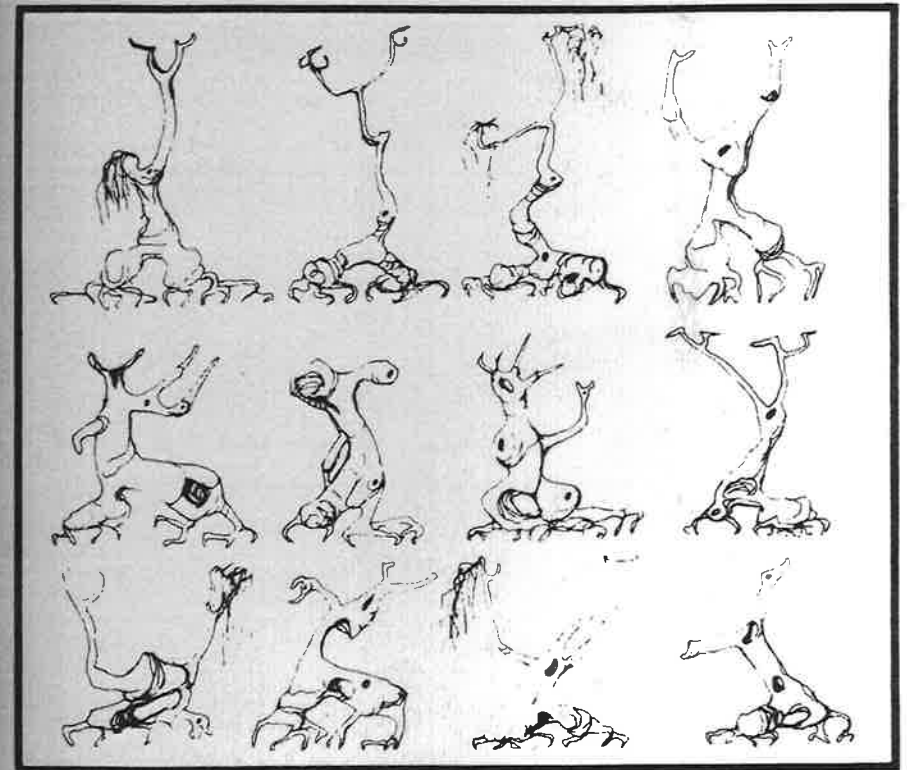


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review essay

Canada, Australia and New Zealand in Search of New Futures — Ian Lowe

Kroker (1986) has argued persuasively that Canadian artistic imagination has made an original, eloquent and comprehensive contribution to our understanding of the technological experience. This is a particular case of the general observation that we all see the world through the lenses of our experiences, our intellectual disciplines and our general acculturation, including our gender conditioning. The theme of the 1986 ACSANZ Conference was the Search for New Futures; in that search, Australia, Canada and New Zealand share special difficulties, but also share an opportunity to make a potentially crucial contribution.

The three countries have a wide range of features in common. Each has a large physical area, much of it inhospitable or effectively uninhabitable, with the wild areas playing important cultural and economic roles; each has a comparatively small population huddled around its geographic periphery; each has an indigenous culture which has been supplanted by a European settler group, acquiring the land by a process which can only be described as robbery with violence; each has a predominantly British culture, significantly leavened by other immigrant communities; each has an economy dominated by the export of raw materials and agricultural produce; each has a small industrial sector, dominated by transnational corporations; each has its political autonomy limited by the domination of the United States of America. Physically, culturally, politically and economically, the three countries share a common destiny.

All these countries face perilous times. Major problems on three distinct time-scales can be identified. These problems are:

- the short-term difficulties of social, economic and political adjustment to a world of falling commodity prices;
- the medium-term threat of nuclear holocaust;
- the long-term problem of managing the transition from a society based on growth in resource consumption in general, and fuel use in particular, under a patriarchal technology to a sustainable life-style based on what could be called a new androgynous technology.

Smith (1986) describes Canada as having a 'colonial, resource-based economy'; the description would be equally apposite if applied to either New Zealand or Australia. Both suffered a severe shock when the traditional market for their exports, imperial Britain, moved to join the E.E.C. Both responded by diversifying their

markets for the same export commodities, rather than by attempting the more fundamental task of re-structuring and diversifying their respective economies. Both share with Canada the difficulty identified by Smith as 'considerable control by its powerful friend, the United States of America'. Lowe and Moran (forthcoming) described the common features of the mineral industries of Australia and Canada, noting especially the dominant role of trans-national corporations in general and those based in the U.S. in particular. Clement (1986) has analysed Canada's role in the world system, and the analysis has a familiar ring to those of us who live in Australia or New Zealand. Smith (1986) argued that Australia has an option denied Canada by the physical proximity of the U.S., the policy of maintaining a modicum of independence by simply 'becoming poor'. Given the extent of the cultural domination of Australia and, to a lesser extent, New Zealand, such a hair-shirt strategy is not likely to be politically realistic. In a world of falling commodity prices and increasing control of technological know-how by large corporations, the three countries have limited scope to manoeuvre away from the role for which they have been cast in the new international economic order.

In terms of the second threat, Hodgins (1986) has argued that we are 'small pawns in the obscene nuclear game of check and counter-check which threatens to wipe the board clear [p.]'. It could be argued that all countries except those having nuclear weapons are in this position. As countries which are clearly allied to the U.S., Canada and Australia are potentially in a position to play important roles in working for a cessation of the obscene arms race. However, the treatment of New Zealand by the Reagan administration strongly suggests that the current U.S. government is far from receptive to such pressure. Canada, by physical proximity, and Australia, by craven complicity, are inexorably linked to the continually-growing American capacity to think the unthinkable. Given the recent findings (Crutzen & Birks, 1982) on the probability of a 'nuclear winter' following even a relatively minor nuclear war, it is clearly urgent to find a way through the entanglement of double-talk and nineteenth-century jingoism which currently prevents serious consideration of our peril.

Assuming that we are spared the nuclear holocaust and are able to cope with the economic and political fall-out from falling commodity prices and consequent re-structuring, the three countries face special problems in adjusting to the end of the age of unlimited resources in general, and cheap oil in particular. Almost all other industrialised countries developed their urban structures in earlier times, the age of the horse or the train. In consequence, the cities of Europe are compact; while the private car has influenced the cities of Europe, they could, without major re-organisation, return to an organisational structure based on public transport. Both the urban structures and the urban life-style of Australia, Canada and New Zealand have developed in the framework of two powerful forces: an abundance of land and the availability of the private car. In consequence, we have urban life-styles which require a much greater supply of fuel energy than that followed in Europe (Newman, 1981). It is difficult to see how these cities can be viable without individual mobility.

It might have been expected that the oil crisis of the 1970s would, in consequence,

have been seen in the countries being discussed as an especially ominous harbinger of the hard times ahead; although there have been serious discussions of future options in Canada (Brooks, Robinson & Torrie, 1983), such an analysis has been totally absent in Australia. Since the ACSANZ Conference, the Australian government has embarked on an exercise of considering the medium-term options (ENERGY 2000, 1986), but the discussion has been almost totally confined to representatives of the energy industries. Such concern, as was present ten years ago, has noticeably ebbed away with falling oil prices, and the level of complacency today is probably as great as it was twenty-five years ago. The limited attention given to the problem of future energy use is almost invariably in terms of a technical 'fix' to generate new supply vectors: petrol from Maui gas in New Zealand, oil from Rundle shale in Australia, the Athabasca tar sands in Canada. Such solutions, while they may be seductively successful in the short term, are inevitably cursed with ecological illiteracy. Not only do they pose massive environmental problems if developed on a sufficient scale to satisfy the liquid fuel demands of their respective countries, but they also distract attention for a further period from the inevitability of fundamental change. Given what is now known about the problems of increasing atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide and controlling nuclear power stations, there is an urgent need to consider ways of moving to a way of life which is at least potentially sustainable. Burnett (1983) has argued that this is the most urgent problem facing developed nations; it is clearly irresponsible in the extreme to continue a lifestyle which we know cannot even in principle be sustained for more than a few decades.

While Australia, Canada and New Zealand face immense common problems in the adjustments of the future, they also have in common a priceless resource. Each of these countries has an indigenous culture, not totally destroyed by the European incursions and attuned to a sustainable lifestyle. As our nations face the formidable challenge of devising structures and processes to cope with the fundamental re-adjustment to a way of life which can be maintained, each has the invaluable resource of its native people and their culture. It remains to be seen whether we will have the perceptiveness — and the humility — to utilise that resource.

As Kroker (1986) has pointed out, the artistic and other creative talents in a society are usually in advance of the mainstream culture in their awareness of the future of society. While Kroker has focused on recent developments, it is salutary to note the perceptive critique of the growth imperative and the throw-away lifestyle written in 1952 by the Australian poet, A.D. Hope. In his poem, *Toast for a Golden Age* (in Ward, 1964), he pictures the other species of the planet paying tribute to

the pensive ape who invented civilisation
and lived on his wits at the rest of the world's expense.

The poem is a sharp reminder that there must be a day of reckoning for our years of living beyond the means of the ecosystem we inhabit. It suggests that we will, in time, inevitably learn that lesson. The poem ends with these verses:

We would not like you to think, your friends are jealous
Their turn may come: they have waited since time began.
But if man is the measure of all things, as you tell us
All things from you may take the measure of man.

So we wait and watch you, and feel the planet grow colder
The deserts grow larger — it's no use making a fuss —
We wait for the day when Time, speaking over your shoulder
Remarks that the dog-in-the manger has missed the bus;

When the heir to the silver spoons and the winning tickets
Has a pain inside him and suddenly loses his hair
And he gropes in his heart, in his hat, in his fourteen pockets
But the ticket is missing — the ticket has never been there.

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