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The Cult of Nation and the Gnat of Culture

"Canada is a political expression. . . . To expect
a national literature is therefore unfair."
– Goldwin Smith, 1891

IN 1986, MARIA TIPPETT NOTED that while the history of the arts and letters in Canada was burgeoning, most works were either by practitioners or scholars of a particular art form. There were some introductory works and edited collections that covered the field in general, but synthetic overviews by historians were non-existent. Tippett urged Canadian historians to take on the work of consolidating the field and relating it to its broader historical context.[1]

Over the last 20 years this has come to pass. Cultural history has, of course, been very much in vogue. Much of it has been a new way of doing social history that explores culture in its broad, anthropological sense as a coherent system of beliefs, customs, and practices peculiar to a particular social group. While this branch of cultural history has a broader focus than Tippett had in mind, there has at the same time been steady growth of a separate branch examining the arts and letters – or, if you will, symbolic culture, as opposed to anthropological culture – accompanied by thatching between the two.

Judicious interdisciplinary cherry-picking has equipped historians with new concepts for analyzing the production, dissemination, and impact of cultural artifacts (e.g., the circuit of communication, encoding/decoding, narrative, genre, the mythomoteur) and the immediate social contexts in which these artifacts are produced (e.g., cultural capital, the cultural field, discourse). These inquiries feed into broader questions about social justice in modern mass democracy informed, as ideological disposition warrants, by the theoretical perspectives of hegemony, governmentality, or the public sphere. Is culture a means — perhaps even *the* means – of realizing the freedom and equality promised by liberal democracy? Or is it but another form of elite manipulation in a system debased by capitalism?

A recurrent theme in the Canadian literature has been the effects of nationalism on cultural production. How has it influenced cultural producers to construct a sense of communal identity that will justify the existence of Canada as a sovereign nation? To what extent has the Canadian state returned the favour by supporting the arts and letters? These questions about nationalism inevitably intersect with social justice issues. Is Canada an authoritarian imposition, a collective struggle to forge a "kinder, gentler America," or a more complex product of diverse influences? With this historiographical context in mind, this essay reviews three recent contributions to the field: Jeffrey Brison, *Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Canada: American Philanthropy and*

1 Maria Tippett, "The Writing of English-Canadian Cultural History, 1970-85," *Canadian Historical Review* LXVII, no. 4 (December 1986): 548-561. The Smith quotation is from Goldwin Smith, *Canada and the Canadian Question* (Toronto: Hunter, Rose, 1891), 47.

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the Arts & Letters in Canada (Montreal: McGill-Queen's, 2005); Ryan Edwardson, *Canadian Content: Culture and the Quest for Nationhood* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008); and Jonathan F. Vance, *A History of Canadian Culture* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2009).

The patronage of the Carnegie and Rockefeller foundations has often been mentioned in histories of early-20th-century Canadian culture, but hitherto has been appreciated only dimly and piecemeal. Jeffrey Brison conducted research in the foundations' archives that provides the first full picture of their extensive activities in Canada and provocative arguments about their effects. He begins with the establishment of the foundations by their robber baron benefactors, but he is primarily concerned with the period following the First World War when professional managers took over and developed funding programs designed to bring modern rational management to the arts and letters. Their activities in Canada developed as a natural extension of their domestic programs, which were facilitated by the two countries' similarities; there was also a disregard – both generous and arrogant – for national borders.

The list of projects the two foundations supported in Canada from the 1920s through to the 1950s is impressive. They played favourites in funding universities, fostering centres of excellence with the expectation these centres would have a trickle-down effect on other institutions in their regions. They provided post-graduate scholarships to cultivate a professional cadre of artists, cultural bureaucrats, and scholars in the humanities and social sciences. Key museums and galleries were bolstered by handsome grants. Academic exchanges stimulated cross-border connections and plugged Canadian scholars into developments elsewhere. Leading Canadian scholars like Harold Innis, Georges-Henri Lévesque, and Donald Creighton benefitted from foundation funding – sometimes through mega-projects such as the study of Canadian-American relations sponsored by the Carnegie Institute for International Peace in the 1930s and other times through direct grants to those whom the foundations deemed Canada's best and brightest.

The 1941 Kingston Conference, which led to the establishment of the Federation of Canadian Artists, was largely conceived of and underwritten by the Carnegie Corporation. Eventually the foundations helped Canadian scholars create the Canadian Social Science Research Council and the Humanities Research Council of Canada, which became the Canadian brokers of their largesse. This form of patronage was critical, for the foundations' lasting contribution was to create an organizational infrastructure for cultural interests across Canada. As Canadian nationalism waxed in the years following the Second World War, the Canadian cultural elite grew increasingly embarrassed by the foreign origin of its sustenance and used its new national organizations to lobby for state patronage. Its efforts led to the Massey Commission, and eventually, after much politicking and uncertainty, to the establishment of the Canada Council.

The American foundations were not troubled by Canadian cultural nationalism. They funded studies of the uniqueness of Quebec as a region, underwrote Creighton's development of the Laurentian thesis, and built organizations congruent with the Canadian national space rather than the larger North American context. Brison contends, however, that there was a bigger game afoot, one that disciplined the arts and letters into a liberal capitalist modernity. He sees the foundations' ambitions to

rationally manage culture as part of a wider "search for order" by the elites of a society being reconstituted on a mass scale by industrial capitalism. National distinctions aside, Canadian elites communed with the foundation managers in a kind of modernist common sense about the nature of cultural progress and extended this logic to their own home turf.

This hegemony argument is stimulating, yet it remains more a theoretical overlay than an integrated proof because, while the archives mined for this study reveal much about the bureaucracy of grants administration, they seem to have offered less about its ideological intentions – besides, if organic intellectuals are supposedly unconscious of their role, the grants moguls could hardly have been expected to articulate their intentions. What Brison does convincingly demonstrate is the foundations' contribution to the organization of Canadian culture on a national scale and the consequent achievement of federal government patronage. This is a substantial contribution to scholarship in the field. He savours the irony of a sector so closely associated with identity and sovereignty owing so much to American inspiration and generosity. Narratives of a Canadian culture forged in defiance of American influences will henceforth have to incorporate more subtle accounts of nationalist resistance to Yankee cultural imperialism.

Once the federal government became a big presence in the cultural sector during the 1970s, it was common for its bureaucrats to justify their enterprises by citing the Massey Report as both progenitor and charter. This myth prevailed for years because while there was episodic research on government cultural policy in the 1960s and the 1970s, no one had treated the topic comprehensively. Ryan Edwardson's doctoral thesis remedied that situation. He concluded that it was not the Massey Commission but a conjunction of other factors in the late-1960s and early-1970s – the threat of Quebec separatism, the feisty nationalism of the era, the Centennial celebrations, the dirigiste proclivities of the Trudeau administration, and NDP influence on the 1972-74 Liberal minority government – that finally got the Canadian state into culture in a big way. Edwardson organized his research around the concept of "Canadian content," a term that has the twin virtues of capturing succinctly a major goal of cultural nationalists and being bureaucratically operationalized.

In this book, Edwardson has reorganized and expanded his doctoral thesis to explore "the changing ways in which Canadian nationhood has been defined and pursued through cultural means during the twentieth century" (5). He begins in the 1920s, a point at which Canadian nationalism was on the upswing and at odds with a continental popular culture borne by the mass media of print, radio, and movies. Edwardson describes Canada as then being in a post-colonial phase in which nationalism performed the ideological work of transforming British subjects into citizens of an emerging, independent Canadian state. Culture was mobilized by nationalists, he observes, "to invest a political construct with the feel of an inclusive familial entity," an exercise that necessitated "reinventing nationhood in accordance with the times, yet portraying it as axiomatic" (5).

To nail down his gelatinous subject matter, Edwardson offers a tripartite periodization. He refers to the period from the 1920s to the late-1950s as "Masseyism" in recognition of the ideals and methods that distinguished cultural patron Vincent Massey and the royal commission he chaired from 1949-51. Masseyism was distinguished by a "culturati" that purveyed highbrow culture as

uplift. The next phase was the "New Nationalism," which was, in contrast, multi-brow, more focused on Canadian identity, and brief – as it was succeeded quickly by "Cultural Industrialism."

While it is quite useful to float such categorizations to help us think about complex subjects, I have some quibbles about this conceptualization. It suggests that one approach holus-bolus superseded the other, when actually elements of each, and others, were always in play. An ecological metaphor, in which certain species thrived under certain conditions, might serve better. "Masseyism" is a nice coinage and will find widespread usage, yet it predates the 1920s, and indeed Massey himself, as it is traceable back to the Confederation Poets if not earlier.[2] The new nationalism (with its defining image of the Peaceable Kingdom) was less an approach to cultural policy than a movement that significantly influenced cultural policy – generating successive tentative ad hoc solutions that cumulatively paved the way for a comprehensive approach to come. Yet Edwardson is right to see it as having had a transformative effect.

Cultural industrialism hits the nail on the head, capturing an approach to cultural policy that prevailed from the late-1960s onward. Edwardson expertly dissects the way that this values-free, market-directed strategy works against cultural nationalists' goal of defining the Canadian nation. Commodification strips Canadianness from cultural products to make them more profitable. The result is a government-subsidized submission to the very logic of continental cultural economics that cultural nationalists had originally sought government support to counter. Canadians end up subsidizing second-rate generic television shows like *Neon Rider*, rock acts like Bryan Adams that cater to a transnational pop music market, and films like *Bubbles Galore*, "feminist sex fantasy" porn that, in its insistence on someone getting screwed, metaphorically offers more Canadian content than less salacious subsidy abusers.

Edwardson's account of cultural industrialism across various cultural sectors suggests that its effects may be more pernicious in some than others. In film and television, where entry costs are high and the outlets for product relatively limited, the perversity of cultural industrialism is painfully obvious. Here the best that can be said is that a domestic production capacity has been fostered that may yet produce enough to satisfy some of the hopes of cultural nationalists. In other areas, like music, literature, and scholarship, Canadian content has done better, perhaps because the cost of participation is lower and the distributive outlets greater in number. And while Edwardson's outrage is justified about how cultural industrialism works against the very cultural nationalist goals it is intended to fulfil, the alternative, in which cultural bureaucrats decide what is good and what is Canadian, offers the equally unappealing prospect of dirigiste artificiality.

Over the last few years, Jonathan Vance has written a number of books aimed at a general readership. If not quite the new Pierre Berton, he is, to his credit, trying to find a popular audience for Canadian history. In *A History of Canadian Culture,* he takes on the formidable task of tracing Canadian culture from pre-contact times to the present. To cover such a broad subject over a long time period requires a tight focus, so he concentrates on the arts and their role in fostering a national identity. At the

2 See, for instance, columns written in *The Globe* by Wilfrid Campbell on 4 February 1893, Duncan Campbell Scott on 4 March 1893, and Archibald Lampman on 11 March 1893, reprinted in *At the Mermaid Inn*, ed. Barrie Davies (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 250-3, 268-9, 270-1.

outset he states his themes as the slow growth of government intervention and the tensions between two cultural binaries: high versus low and traditional versus modern. Another theme that eventually emerges is the enduring dispute among cultural nationalists about whether Canadian works merit extra support to overcome a colonial inferiority complex and jump-start a national culture.

One of the virtues of overview works such as Vance's is that new insights are generated simply through juxtaposition of contemporary phenomena that hitherto have been treated separately. This is particularly true in the case of the arts and letters, each of which has long been in its own academic silo. Vance is an accomplished writer who can deftly summarize topics as opaque as late-19th-century international copyright law in a few clear paragraphs. He also warns the reader that he had to be ruthlessly selective in order to keep his book to a reasonable length. For the same reason, presumably, and perhaps too because he is trying to tell a story for a general audience, little time is spent dwelling on the intricacies of cultural nationalist ideology. Perhaps its truths are taken to be self-evident for a readership assumed to be with the program. "Few would deny that there is still such a thing a national culture," Vance writes in conclusion, having documented "the journey towards distinct Canadian forms of expression" (454). Much recent scholarship has problematized this project, drawing on inscrutable French theorists (and the odd Italian Marxist), but there is in these pages not even a whiff of a Gitane.

In the aggregate, the works under discussion here suggest that the history of Canadian arts and letters has reached a fulsome state. Brison's monograph fills a yawning gap in the historiography, and the fact that Edwardson and Vance were able to write their overviews demonstrates that there are now enough secondary sources available to survey the field both temporally and in most of its component parts. Without in any way detracting from these significant contributions to the field, what follows here are some suggestions for future research – some minor points to begin with and then some more substantial issues.

The literature in this field, first of all, suffers from too many terms being thrown about in a cavalier fashion without careful explanation of their meaning. The terms "modernism" and "modernity" (and the related "modern" and "modernization"), for instance, are carelessly deployed as all-purpose explanations in varying contexts. Citing one passage from the introduction of Marshall Berman's *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* does not suffice: Berman is discussing a phenomenon that spans centuries. Most readers have a vague notion of what is meant by these terms, but when they are key causal concepts more precision is required about how they are manifested in different historical contexts at different times. Authors might understandably wish to sidestep quagmires of theory and semantics, but if they choose to do so they should at least define their terms for the purposes at hand.

More troubling, given the specific subject matter of these works, is the lack of exploration of how cultural nationalists conceptualize the interrelationships between the arts and letters, nation, and state. Inspired by the romantic nationalist view of the nation as a people unified culturally with a consequent natural right to self-government, cultural nationalists typically expected symbolic culture to prove the existence of the nation by articulating its cultural identity. "A national literature," wrote E.H. Dewart in 1864, is "the record of a country's mental progress" and "the expression of its intellectual life." Yet there was, at the same time, the constant hope

that the arts and letters would also promulgate identity to help hold the polity together. As Dewart put it, literature was "the bond of national unity."[3] In short, the expectation was that the arts and letters should both reflect and affect the broader culture. Why an identity that was supposedly innate and deeply ingrained was in such dire need of reinforcement is an internal contradiction in cultural nationalist ideology that almost always goes unrecognized and unaddressed.

The historiography also displays a prevailing assumption that cultural nationalism is focused exclusively on developing an indigenous identity. In fact, cultural nationalism always seeks another goal as well: accomplishment on the world stage that will allow Canada to claim a place among "civilized" nations. These two objectives were historically at odds in the Canadian context because international success was inevitably judged by Western European canonical criteria. It was hard to attain international recognition with content that was uniquely Canadian, but it could be done by infusing international form with Canadian content, or even by adapting the form somewhat to Canadian exigencies without modifying it beyond international recognition.

Cultural nationalists who put the emphasis on international recognition were typically dismissed by those who emphasized identity as hopelessly colonial and too submissive to the fashion of the metropolis. The identity camp, in turn, was dismissed by the cosmopolitan wing as parochial boosters of mediocrity. The most gratifying of all outcomes for cultural nationalists came on those rare occasions when this underlying conundrum was successfully resolved and a distinctly Canadian cultural product received international recognition. The Group of Seven's success in winning foreign acclaim for paintings of unmistakably Canadian scenes is a case in point. More often the two fundamental objectives were at odds, a predicament that lends the study of Canadian cultural nationalism much of its complexity and interest.

Another defining characteristic of this literature to date has been its privileging of professional cultural producers. This bias is attributable in part to the affinity of historians with those engaged in the cultural nationalist project. Historians themselves are, of course, cultural producers within a national paradigm, their craft an act of identity-formation. They depend on archives deposited by like-minded predecessors. The result is a paucity of cultural history about other types of Canadians in their roles as both producers and consumers.

In this regard it is worth noting how the organization of culture that Brison documents privileged producers who were national and professional over those who were local and amateur. The irony, from today's perspective, is that Canadian nationalists were following an American model that ultimately led, as Edwardson shows us, down the dead-end alley of cultural industrialism. This outcome makes the community centre proposal made by the Federation of Canadian Artists to the Turgeon Committee in 1944 appear in retrospect to have been a significant road not taken. It called for government support in building facilities to foster local cultural activities in communities across the country. Here was a model for cultural development that was neither mass nor managed. Community centres were to be an

3 Edward Hartley Dewart, *Selections from Canadian Poets* (Montreal: Lovell, 1864; rept., ed. Douglas Lochhead, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), ix.

alternative space, at the grassroots level, in which culture would be a participatory element of community life. There is always, of course, the risk of indulging in populist nostalgia for a concept that may have turned out to have had its own unique problems. Yet with the modern massification of culture that demanded a national, state-sponsored response now being digitally fragmented, we may have circled back to a point of departure where it would be worth considering again an approach that leaves the mass market to the United States and instead associates Canadian culture with alternative, local, or grassroots cultural production – a kind of "limited identities" approach to cultural policy.

Studying consumption, as opposed to production, raises the formidable challenge of how to research audience response. While the number of professional producers are relatively few and well documented, audiences are comparatively vast – their responses ephemeral and largely unrecorded. Another impediment, from the cultural nationalist viewpoint, is that, unlike the producers of culture, consumers of Canadian culture have disregarded the nationalist paradigm, blithely consuming a culture disapproved by their cultural betters. In this regard, students of Canadian cultural consumption will have to wrestle with the proposition that a fundamental, even defining characteristic of the Canadian cultural condition is the consumption of imported culture from a Canadian perspective that negotiates unique meanings from its particular point of view (a concept dubbed "reversible resistance" by the editors of *The Beaver Bites Back*).[4] Martin Short expressed this notion succinctly: "When Americans watch television, they watch television. When Canadians watch television they watch American television."[5] This is not the kind of identity marker sought by cultural nationalists yet, in a backhanded way, it may serve as an alternative source of national pride. As Paul Rutherford has pointed out, marginality is not just the Canadian condition; it is the condition of most of the world, the postmodern norm.[6] Canadians can thus congratulate themselves on being better at being marginal than anyone else.

Lacking faith in consumers' critical defences, Canadian cultural nationalists have long importuned the state to defend Canadian culture. Students of this project over time cannot help but notice how their subjects "can't get no satisfaction." Initial advances are rebuffed and more determined and promising approaches deflected or forestalled – invariably just when paradise seems imminent. Even when all the stars align and the state finally acts, the results, as Edwardson documents, are unsatisfying. This disconnect between the goals of cultural nationalism and the outcomes of cultural policy is a puzzle, and the answer to this puzzle lies in the fact that the

4 David H. Flaherty and Frank E. Manning, eds., *The Beaver Bites Back: American Popular Culture in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's, 1993). Judging by the works at hand, this concept has not caught on, perhaps because the coinage "reversible resistance" does not describe it well. "Marginal perspective" may be a better formulation or perhaps Dallas Smythe's term "cultural screen"; see Dallas Smythe, *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness, and Canada* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1981).

5 Gerald Friesen, *Citizens and Nation: An Essay on History, Communication and Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 195.

6 Paul Rutherford, "Made in America: The Problem of Mass Culture in Canada," in *The Beaver Bites Back*, 278.

Canadian state has rarely bought into romantic nationalist ideology. Instead, it has manifested a functional approach to cultural policy that has been concerned primarily with sustaining a trans-national political culture that directly supports the state as opposed to the nation.

Richard Collins long ago challenged the romantic nationalist linkage of culture, identity, and nation. He questioned whether a state needs a distinctive symbolic culture to sustain it. All it really needs, he suggested, is a political culture.[7] When this proposition is tested against some salient features of Canadian cultural policy since Confederation, the results are intriguing. Arguably the government's efforts in the field have typically applied only to those areas where the immediate interests of the state are directly at stake according to a short-term, pragmatic rationale. Consider, for example, the contours of early Canadian cultural policy. There were some limited and tentative measures, such as a postal subsidy for magazines and newspapers. Following the First World War, the government subsidized the establishment of the Canadian Press – an alternative pipeline for news along east-west lines. Its first major cultural initiative was, of course, the creation of public radio in the early-1930s, followed soon after by the reorganization and expansion of its documentary film functions into the National Film Board.

Throughout this period, cultural nationalists called for state support for a national literature and, after the First World War, for similar measures to help create a Canadian feature film industry. Yet subsidies materialized for neither. Books and films – the realms where cultural nationalists might look for expressions of national identity – did not qualify for assistance. The media that attracted subsidies were omnibuses that carried, besides culture, Canadian news and public affairs (even today, audience statistics tell us that these are the most popular Canadian television shows). Cultural policy was therefore directed towards the tangible business of nurturing a Canadian political discourse and a class of people in communities across the country who partook in it, knew the federal political game and how to play it, and appreciated the benefits they derived from doing so.[8] The state, in other words, took a functional approach to cultural subsidies, which is to say that it acted only where political culture was at stake – and even then did the minimum required.

The same logic explains the government's reaction to the recommendations of the Massey Commission's landmark report on the arts, letters, and sciences in 1951. Public broadcasting was reinforced and extended to television while political and economic arguments convinced the government to fund universities. In other aspects of Canadian culture, though, the government hesitated. It did not want to get more involved in promoting culture, but it did see the wisdom of fostering a substantial interest group. It took six years and the conjunction of unusually propitious circumstances for it to create the Canada Council. As Carl Berger notes, in doing so it was extending to intellectuals and artists the system of subsidies that had accrued for other elites since the introduction of the National Policy.[9]

7 Richard Collins, *Culture, Communication and National Identity: The Case of Canadian Television* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 327-9.

8 Karl W. Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication: An Inquiry into The Foundations of Nationality* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1953), 97.

9 Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 179.

As described by Edwardson, the great growth period in Canadian cultural policy came fully a decade-and-a-half after the Massey Commission. It came, in part, because there was another peak in nationalist sentiment during the 1960s and that interest had to be accommodated.[10] But more importantly, in functional terms, the state was threatened – in this case by the possible secession of Quebec. The federal government finally got fully involved in culture because one of its provinces made culture a major federal-provincial battlefield.

Yet even as federal cultural intervention grew by leaps and bounds, the government avoided identity issues. While the nationalist intelligentsia had developed a consensus on Canadian identity in the 1960s, by the 1970s its identity theory was under attack by various interests that felt left out of the picture. The implementation of cultural industrialism allowed politicians to avoid the accusation that they were playing favourites and freed bureaucrats from having to make subjective judgements about cultural value or what was Canadian. It was a functional strategy in that it responded to a national unity crisis and accommodated the interests of a vocal interest group, but it did so by avoiding the complex and contentious implications of romantic nationalism. Why take the trouble when the work of national identity formation was being done by the many Gzowskiites stalking the land?

The limits of the post-war welfare state were reached in cultural policy. The forces opposed to intervention – inertia, laissez-faire attitudes, freedom of speech principles, and the fear of provoking an egalitarian backlash against cultural snobs – dictated a cultural industries approach that was a harbinger of the neoliberal reaction of the 1980s. "Remember the potency of cultural non-decision," Ian Mackay observes, "the state's undeclared but crucial strategy (through the chronic underfunding of cultural producers and a bourgeois insistence that cultural activities pay a return on investment) of abandoning many spheres of culture to the workings of the market."[11] With the free trade agreement of 1988, the government bound itself by international treaty obligations from taking any further action in the field. In an era of globalization and trade liberalization, the only cultural identity it really needed was a few national symbols with which to brand itself internationally.

This has been only a cursory test of a proposition that requires further investigation. Yet on the face of it, it is plausible that Canadian cultural policy has always been about doing the minimum necessary according to a functional evaluation of where the state's interest resides in sustaining a political culture. A minimalist-functionalist approach is more manageable than the pursuit of a national identity in a polity divided by language, ethnicity, region, and other loyalties. If Canadian cultural policy has been a function of state formation and perpetuation rather than national "imagineering," we can at least take comfort that it is a sturdy growth rooted, to paraphrase Locke, on "low but solid ground."

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10 Viewed through the lens of minimalist-functionalism, the state itself is not a nationalist actor (although it may be acted upon by nationalist forces within its stable of supporting interests). If nationalism brings enough pressure to bear on the state, then the state will accommodate it; but this would be as a matter of realpolitik and not out of nationalist ideology.

11 Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's, 1994), 305.