Identifying Canada

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IN THE FALL of 2000, a special issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing* was given over to the question famously posed by Northrop Frye, "Where is Here?" Kevin Flynn, the editor of that issue, postulated that the millennium was an appropriate moment to take stock, to consider how "we, as a community, were thinking and feeling about the past, present, and future of Canadian literature." Not strictly focused on literature, the essays were broader in scope, as was in part evidenced by Diana Brydon's contribution, "It's Time for a New Set of Questions." Therein, she raised other pointed questions, including how it might be possible "to conceive of a nation as a 'viable cultural form' without this nostalgic evocation of a lost authenticity that never, in truth, existed?" The special issue registered a desire to return to a new set of considerations and questions about Canadian identity - in spite of Flynn's expressed concerns about our indifference to it. Initially Flynn was dismayed by the lack of response to his invitation to discuss the topic; apparently, it was one that made most critics stretch, yawn, and beg off from further discussion rather than rush to the aid of that seemingly ever damsel-in-distress, Canadian identity. Yet the critical mass about constructions of Canadian national identity that has since appeared would surely assuage at least Flynn's fears about such purported indifference.

Daniel Coleman's *White Civility: The Literary Project of English Canada* (2006) is one such contribution to that critical mass. Therein, he investigates how, in approaching English-Canadian

national identity, critics have tended to celebrate, first, our departure from strict bi-culturalism and, second, the advent of multiculturalism as the subsequent prevailing cultural ethos. In doing so, however, critics have apparently foregone the very examination of how a "normative" (English) Canadianness came to be regarded as such in the first place - that is, he demonstrates how the "we, as a community" is not so coherent or inclusive. There are a number of studies in this capacity that would reinforce Coleman's claims. His argument goes further in its tracing of the genealogy of English-Canadianness; in attempting to apprehend its logic, Coleman suggests that he has learned that "White Canadian culture is obsessed, and organized by its obsession, with the problem of its own civility." Since 'whiteness' has been conflated with civility, whiteness has also been 'naturalized' as the governing principle of Canadian identity. Civility has thus at times been used as a means of masking the real racism that also determines who has access to privilege.

Although vaunted as a proper and progressive successor to bi-culturalism because it seemingly corrects racist attitudes that have too long prevailed, multiculturalism has thus also come under attack, Coleman observes, by the very individuals it seemingly was designed to protect and to include in a civil space. Well might you ask: why would anyone want to attack that seemingly great goddess of tolerance, which purportedly equalizes and celebrates all cultures? Because in circumventing a thorough analysis of the structures of exclusion that served as the initial foundations of this country, in suppressing or 'forgetting' how unity is often "effected by means of brutality" (see Renan), contemporary forms of racism can be neither addressed nor redressed. So, Coleman devotes himself to exposing those ideological foundations and inviting others to consider how those very structures might be properly rebuilt.

Those foundations are related to prevalent social and cultural

discourses that gave rise to at least four prominent allegorical figures that were certainly featured in literary texts. These figures were disseminated widely in literary form and in rhetoric, used in the service of national discourse, and shaped notions of citizenship in order to provide models for what it meant to be Canadian; taken together, they might be seen as mediating and reifying "the privileged, normative status of British whiteness in Canada." Coleman cites four of these figures as follows: the Loyalist brother, the Scottish orphan, the muscular Christian, and the colonial son (sometimes better known as "the Boys' Club"). The Loyalist brother was implicitly meant to show how Canada developed as a nation independently from the United States, even if it shared some affinities. The "enterprising Scottish orphan" was representative of a larger body of Scottish Canadians who "were the primary inventers and promoters of the category of Britishness that is the conceptual foundation of the Canadian idea of civility." The muscular Christian stood for ideals that, on the one hand, fuelled socially progressive movements, but, on the other hand, represented others to whom such beneficence was extended as "foreigners," as less than full members of society. The colonial son was depicted as maturing, earning his independence from an imperial parent. The kind of figure to which Coleman refers sometimes took its form as the brawny, white heroic logger *à la Ralph Connor* - the Johnny Logger who imbibed Johnny Lager after defending territory that really wasn't his from a deservedly resistant and angry Indigenous presence, and, while cooling his heels in the evening, who wrote letters to dear old dad about how he was really just a chip off the old block.

When the four figures Coleman sketches out are collectively assessed, these figures purportedly showcase Canada's "fictive ethnicity" - that is, he suggests, quoting Etienne Balibar, how "a nation represents the narrative of its diverse peoples' past and future *as if they* formed a national community" (italics mine). As theorist Benedict Anderson has noted, national communities are

imagined as "horizontal" - all peoples are envisaged as equals, even if they are not so. Clearly, as Coleman also demonstrates, no nation forms "naturally," nor does it have a coherent sense of community, culture, and origins. So it is in Canada - a cursory look at the history of its Indigenous population, or of the head tax imposed upon the Chinese, or of the relocation Japanese-Canadians into camps, or of discrimination against Black Loyalists would demonstrate that the 'coherence' emanated from a centre of normalcy that privileged whiteness - and, obviously, maleness. In spite of growing awareness of a "fantasmatic history" (to borrow Zizek's term) that would undercut the symbolic history so vigorously bolstered by a national discourse, multiculturalism might be seen, not as that great goddess of justice after all, but as a way of diverting our attention from unearthing the real racism that was also crucial to this country's developing notion of civility. In clinging to multiculturalism, one may overlook or repel a history of white hegemony, while one still finds oneself flirting with its more bewitching twin, the ideal of Canadian civility.

Clearly, in attempting to render its subjects 'civil,' proponents of national identity were informed by a racially based project that privileged whiteness, although, as Coleman suggests, civility is in itself a commendable enterprise. It is necessary, he argues, to adopt a sense of "wry civility," a critical positioning that is at times ambivalent and critically self-conscious: that is, a yoking together of "the contradictory or ambivalent project that purports to provide a public space of equality and liberty for all at the same time as it attempts to protect this freedom and equality from threats within and without - and 'wry' in the sense of being critically self-conscious of this very ambivalence and of the contradictions it involves." It means peering beyond the image that those narratives have reflected back to us: that Canada is inherently more civil than, say, a country like the U.S. or non-White countries. It means being self-conscious about how we may be perpetuating such limiting and constrictive

narratives - narratives that Coleman shows may limit in terms of race - and also in terms of gender.

Ryan Edwardson's *Canadian Content: Culture and the Quest for Nationhood* takes on a broader cultural line; so he assesses the manner in which Canadian nationhood was formulated in various cultural media throughout the twentieth century. Using cultural forms as a means of imprinting nationhood, certain figures who occupied seminal positions within the government or the nationalistic intelligentsia, or who were financial investors used each other's resources to do so. National identifiers, for example, could not have been dispersed without the systems of communication that were regulated by the government but from which industrialists also profited. These figures, Edwardson notes, were reinventing our "national imagined community," so that it responded to the times even as it was constructed as urgently necessary to the country's survival. Even if a notion of 'civility' might have governed quite consistently, as Coleman might very well argue, sometimes they diverged significantly from one generation to another ideologically and offered conceptions of national identity that were considerably different in direction.

The first 'great moment' in the constructing of Canadian identity relates to the allegorical figure that Coleman identifies as the "colonial son" - the figure who matures and whose filial relationship suggests attachment to imperial notions of conduct and destiny. The Massey Commission was developed during the modern period when new systems of mass communication were exploited by advertisers to propagate consumer culture; the same period was regarded as vulnerable because, in the colony-to-nation transition, American culture was also becoming a powerful influence. Named after Vincent Massey, the cultural philanthropist, diplomat, and Governor General, the Massey Commission was thus forged by nationalists who called upon

the government to make changes to and gain greater control over forms of mass media, seen by nationalists as a tool for determining the country's stability. They were concerned with pursuing their ideas about what was 'culturally cool' - what Edwardson refers to as their "cultural Weltanschauung" - by using "mass outlets to provide a cultured middle ground; the paradigm was inherently limited by its attempt to popularize a non-populist ideology through content unpalatable to many audiences." In the 1950s, mass culture was seen as detrimental to the 'civil' agenda that proponents of national identity advocated. Proper education would counterbalance both unrefined and anti-intellectual cultural forms - like unfairly disparaged detective fiction - and checked the inundation of American pulp forms. Although the Commission did not advance severe measures to restrict the importation of American culture, the government of Canada took some action by establishing the National Film Board of Canada in 1939 "to produce educational, industrial, informational, and documentary films, thereby offering nationalists an opportunity to canonize a cultured alternative to the films coming Hollywood."

The second nationalist movement emerged around the 1960s and offered a new national design and means of reclaiming national sovereignty, as it also found ways of negotiating with middle-class interests and ideas while still retaining strong ties to popular culture. In differentiating itself from America, a continued point of vulnerability, the nation was being re-envisaged as a country of 'greater good,' the annoyingly squeaky clean counterpart to the U.S: "This was not only nation-building but nation reclaiming," Edwardson claims. "[T]urning inwards offered a means of consolidating nationhood in a time of American imperialism." The nationalism that had at once been used to forge identity was no longer sufficient for the wider social base to which nationalism needed to appeal; so, as Edwardson ironically observes, "a comic book such as *Captain Canuck* would thus be worth more to nationhood than any

Shakespearean play offered by the Stratford Festival" - even if the said comic book might have been seen as far less entertaining. Quotas were thus applied to the film and broadcasting sectors to ensure that a proportionate dose of Canadian content was administered to a flailing and wayward public, the kind which were satirized by Mordecai Richler in *The Incomparable Atuk*: the representative industrialist of the novel, Buck Twentyman, cleverly fulfills such quotas by playing Canadian shows in the wee hours of the morning when, thankfully, no one is awake to watch them and playing other, more lucrative American shows during prime viewing hours.

The Trudeau era that followed in the late 1960s and 1970s was one that also became preoccupied with the nation's cultural industries, especially in light of a federal state that had been rendered vulnerable by the calls for separation from Quebec. This period, Edwardson asserts, develops a third model of Canadianization, which meant producing quantitatively, even if meant losing in terms quality (hence the proliferation of more 'Captain Canada' and other Canuck-like comic books). Trudeau's response to the susceptibility of the government, his decision to strengthen federal authority and hegemony, took the form of establishing the Arts and Cultural Policy of 1968. In closely monitoring all forms of cultural production and using a system of quotas in order to guarante a certain measure of Canadian content, Trudeau and his colleagues hoped to strengthen and find support for the federal government. Some of these measures included earmarking funds for those artistic events that promotion national unity and the creation of the Canadian Book Publishing Development Program (1979), the latter designed to inject money into the national publishing industry. Treating Canadian culture as a commodity, however, meant a loss in terms of its qualitative elements: "Culture, in terms put forth by theorist Jean Baudrillard, was now treated on par with Levi jeans and washing machines."

The cultural industrialism that followed in the 1980s was characterized by a government that clawed back its support as it rhetorically emphasized the importance of culture to nation building. The legacy of this period is visible in the effects on culture today. The Department of Canadian Heritage still promotes its successes by churning out figures related to employment and foreign investment, when, as Edwardson notes, "from a more critical point of view, industrial activity cannot be equated with culture, a national sense of self, or even opportunities for domestic expression; sales merely signify achievements in producing, marketing and exporting goods." It has meant, of course, confusion between "vested interests" and "genuine concerns" - as it also registers that those genuine concerns might only represent a minority and not national consensus. It thus also means revisiting, in a more globally-minded era in which nation-states still carry some importance, what a shared national vision might entail and how it might be shaped in such a way to accommodate those who are currently defined as citizens within the nation proper.

Janet B. Friskney takes on a more microscopic view of the development of Canadian culture and identity through her focus on the publishing world in *New Canadian Library: The Ross-McClelland Years, 1952-1978*; she demonstrates how even the "micro" can have "macro" implications. Two figures, English professor Malcolm Ross (1911-2002) and publisher Jack McClelland (1922-2004), were the "principal architects" of the New Canadian Library Series, which they envisioned as part of a larger appeal to - or a venture to create - a receptive Canadian reading audience. The Series was seen as providing a mid-range book, neither the mass-market paperback produced in large print runs for a short-term period, nor the hardcover book produced in limited quantities; instead, quality paperbacks would be produced in smaller volumes, but with a longer period of time in view. Ross inspired the idea of the series in a casual

postscript to a letter to McClelland by suggesting a "series of low-priced paper-cover Canadian classics" that would "do wonders for the teaching of Canadian literature."

Why would such an idea appeal to McClelland? Because, as McClelland noted, the Series would perform "a service to the people of Canada" in its shaping of a national canon. Both Ross and McClelland were invested (and not merely in a manner of speaking) in promulgating a national agenda. McClelland explained that this enterprise, as he was quoted as saying in the Canadian edition of *Time Magazine*, was motivated by both vested interest and genuine concern: "Paperback publishing is a gamble at ridiculous odds. We may lose our shirts, but we hope we can stir an interest in Canadian writing that will eventually pay off." Thus, more properly speaking, the architects of the Series determined what books were "worthy" of being representative of a national aesthetic and a national agenda - and, especially from the publisher's end, eventually hoped it would make a profit too. The audience was sufficiently broad in scope to engage both post-secondary and secondary institutions, but not so narrow to exclude the public at large. From that viewpoint, McClelland hoped that he would also raise a generation of readers who would have been cultivated to appreciate Canadian literature - or rather, *his sense* of what he considered to be good Canadian literature.

McClelland took this responsibility seriously. Since, as he claimed, the publisher was "to serve as a middleman between the creative author and the reader," and since books were from his perspective one of the more accepted means for the "diffusion or dissemination of knowledge in permanent form," he saw that the publisher's decision-making process determined the shape and legacy of a cultural heritage. The work also involved, from McClelland's point of view, not merely selecting those books that would come to inform and then represent the nation's citizens. In a manner that bears similarities to Coleman's

description of the "colonial son," Canadian literature itself (rather than what it depicted) was regarded by McClelland as in its "infancy."

So the two collaborated upon their initial list - one that would not surprise most for its privileging of male, white authors, and for embodying what might be conceived of as the quintessential Canadian experience - which included Frederick Philip Grove, Stephen Leacock, Morley Callaghan, Hugh MacLennan, W.O. Mitchell and Thomas Raddall. Their literary tastes often, if not always, coincided. McClelland, for example, largely valued the hearty, meat-and-potatoes Canadian literary stuff - prairie experiences, small-town life, snowstorms, angst and loneliness in the long nights of winter. Something akin to cod-liver oil - unpalatable, even if it is considered good for one's constitution - some of these books were added to another list that McClelland insisted upon referring to as "classics," even when his own personal opinion of the said "classics" substantially differed. Ross himself supplied McClelland with a preliminary list of what he conceived as "representative" (rather than as "classics"). After discussion with his staff, McClelland narrowed the first four books slated for publication: Frederick Philip Grove's *Over Prairie Trails*, Morley Callaghan's *Such is My Beloved*, Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and My House*, and Stephen Leacock's *Literary Lapses*. As Friskney notes, the creation of the Series was thus also implicit in the processes of canonization through the decades of the mid-twentieth century: the NCL was implicated in establishing the status of several authors and their works within Canadian literary history.

After they addressed other significant considerations related to pricing, titles, covers, and marketing strategies, the NCL was officially launched on 17 January 1958. Although it received positive media attention and supportive private responses, McClelland was tentative about celebrating such an accomplishment earlier than necessary. "What I really need is

not suggestions for further titles in the series," he wrote to Ross many years after the launch of the NCL, "but the name of a good psychoanalyst." Whatever the psychological strain involved in trying to work with that entity referred to as 'Canadian culture,' as Friskney notes, both he and Ross were seen as integral to raising consciousness about a national literary presence as well as paving the way for other, like-minded cultural endeavours - whatever and however that might be defined.