

## Book Review: *Notes for a Native Land*

Like many people who are not certain of the validity of their nationalistic feelings, Canadians are concerned about them. They do lots of poking at the scab which covers the stitches left by Confederation. Is it possible that the two pieces of flesh will actually grow together? Is it conceivable, even, that transplanting Quebec into English Canada won't cause tissue rejection? Will it ever heal?

You can push analogies too far; this one, for instance, can be pushed only as far as the assertion that if it doesn't heal, Canada will never be particularly healthy. But you can't push it far enough to argue that we ought to let the scars alone – “stop picking it or it'll never heal.” Picking at it may well help. Certainly putting a bandage of silence on it does nothing to soothe the differences between French and English, between Upper and Lower Canada, between prairies and cities, fishermen and farmers, Maritime and West.

Oberon Press has been picking at it, and has come up with a book, edited by Andy Wainwright, and called *Notes for a Native Land*. It's notes *for*, not *of*, and this is appropriate; the notes do not arise out of any particular sense of community, on the whole, but seem designed to create such a sense. Are we Canadians? Is it, a fact, possible to be a Canadian?

The Writers – a wide span of them, from Maritime poets like Alden Nowlan to big-time critics like Northrop Frye, from transplanted Americans like Dennis Duffy to *echt*-Canadians like George Whalley – who contribute to this book all seem to begin with this question. Is it more meaningful to say “I am a Canadian” than it is to say “I was born on the fifty-third parallel?”

There are, of course, lots of answers in the book; thirty-eight of them (one for each contributor), in fact. Some say merely “No” – on the grounds that Canada is too diverse, for instance, or because the concept of nationalism is meaningless in any case . . . , and some say “Yes” – mostly, it seems, because of geography (we have in common, at least, our winters). Some say something else, and it is often these answers that are the most valuable. Raymond Souster, for instance, merely writes a “very short poem”:

. . . But only God can make a tree'  
-- He'll never try it in Sudbury.

Milton Acorn writes an essay titled “Goddam it Prince Edward Island Needs That Causeway,” which does not, at least on the surface, seem a very direct response to the question; Ian Young argues that what he really ought to offer is simply a lot of blood and bile, maybe a few bone fragments, but “it would be virtually impossible to print and would probably have to be contained in a polyethelene bag and attached to the rest of the book with Magictape: 'This seal not to be broken by the retailer.'”

The answers vary in quality, too, but the really important thing about the book isn't the literary quality of the essays and poems: it's the coherence the book creates. None of the contributors, I imagine, could be brought to agree fully with any of the others about what it really means to be a Canadian. Is it, as has been suggested, merely that all Canadians hate Toronto? Is it merely being north of, and alternative to, the USA? Is it merely being, always, only three hours from the end of the world? Is it just being cold?

But somehow, when you've finished the book, you feel that the answer lies in the way the writers disagree, in their very variousness. It sounds like copping out to say it, but it's clear from reading *Notes for a Native Land* that Canada's unity is its diversity, that it's the very fact that God will never try to make another tree in Sudbury, while making almost nothing else in New Brunswick, that holds the

thing together. The variousness of the contributors and of the styles of their contributions is the most marked characteristics of the book. And precisely in this it most clearly reflects its Canadianness. This sort of variousness was once, perhaps, found in the United States, but now no longer characterizes it. There is now an “American” set of attitudes, just as there has always been an English and a Romanian and a Spanish set of attitudes. Lionel Rubinoff asks parenthetically, in the most incurably optimistic of the contributions to the book, “Can anyone even begin to conceive what could possibly count as ‘uncanadian activities?’” Of course not. There are, however, “unamerican” activities – as well, presumably, as “unrussian,” “unenglish,” and “unzambian.” All such expressions suggest the dominance of one style, of one set of beliefs and habits. Canada doesn’t yet have such a domination. If you ask a Canadian to identify himself, chances are that he’ll answer that he’s a Miramichier, a Québécois, or a Cape Bretoner before he’ll say he’s a Canadian. Maybe we ought to think about whether or not it’s better so.

What can Canada do, after all? It can’t aspire to dominate the world, thank God. Nor can it hope to lead the way in most fields. Culture, science, and influence tend to follow guns and money. What we can do, perhaps, is to turn the small weak nation’s logical fear of war into a virtue, turn ourselves into the consummate federalists. Does unity have to mean uniformity? Can’t different peoples live together without a master-slave relationship? Solve those problems and you’ve done something that counts. The Atomic Age needs nothing more profoundly than skilled federalists. Violence and bigotry could become “uncanadian activities” – because they’re unhuman activities.

If you want to think about the problem, buy the book and install it in your bathroom. Read the essays and poems one at a time. They’ll confuse you – a laudable achievement for any book.