

Letters from Denmark: Thoughts on Canadian Studies

TAKING CANADIAN STUDIES ABROAD

My experience with Canadian Studies began with Bryan Adams.

In January 2002, I arrived in Aarhus, Denmark, as the new visiting lecturer in Canadian Studies. This was odd for a couple of reasons: I had just received my PhD from the University of Western Ontario, in *History*, and, to be frank, couldn't have located Denmark on a map. In other words, this was less about seeing the world or flying the flag than a junior scholar needing a job. In the department of English, which hosts the only Centre for Canadian Studies in Scandinavia (as well as centres for American and Irish studies), I was to teach two courses: a first-year survey of Canadian literature, and an upper-year course on Canadian culture. On the first day I asked the senior class what they thought of when they thought of Canada.

The first three answers: wilderness, hockey, and Bryan Adams. Oh boy, I thought.

By the end of the semester, the first-year class had read everything from David Thompson's *Narrative of His Explorations in Western America*¹ to Alistair MacLeod's short stories. (Astonishingly, these 19-year olds often read a novel a *week*—something I have yet to see my students in Canada do—and in their second or third language!) The senior students, for their part, began with the imperial language of "The Maple Leaf Forever" and ended up wrestling with the logic of CanCon legislation. It was, in retrospect, a fantastic teaching experience.

Sometimes I felt a little like a school-teacher in a one-room schoolhouse. They were all very bright and beautifully fluent in English, but I couldn't assume any prior knowledge of Canada. Indeed, this was precisely *why* Canadian Studies

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appealed to them: like kids around the world, they were inundated with American popular culture, but Canada remained essentially a blank slate. So each class was in part about the text, but more about the context: the reading served as an entree to the political, economic, and social climate of the day. How to teach *The Backwoods of Canada*,² for example, without explaining the Loyalist migration, the formation of Upper Canada, the experience of pioneering? How to talk about the value of the CBC without a sense of the living conditions of the Great Depression on the prairie?

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE CANADIAN STUDIES PROJECT

By the time I left Denmark to travel on a Eurail Pass—could there be any more "Canadian" thing to do?—I had come to several conclusions about Canadian Studies. My subsequent experiences—joining the faculty at Dalhousie University, for example—have only reinforced these.

- One of its greatest strengths is its multidisciplinary. Teaching history through literature was, in part, a young historian's way of coping with material outside her ken (I had only minored in English as an undergraduate, for Pete's sake). But, I believe, it is actually a better way of understanding place. When writing my book on Georgian Bay—ostensibly an environmental history of a particular part of Ontario—I didn't just bury myself in archival land-use records; I wanted to incorporate poetry and art alongside sessional papers or park memos, because each kind of source reflected a different way in which people had seen or used the landscape. Their reactions could be imaginative and romantic at times, pragmatic and utilitarian at others. This also meant drawing on the spatial interests of geographers and planners, the concepts of place in folklore, ideas of representation in literature and art history. Integrating different disciplines into a single story rewards us with a much more complete image of the past and a better reflection of actual historical experience.
- I think Canadian Studies operates in much the same way. We can circle the subject from different angles, because we can't understand Canada or its workings through only its political structure, or its ecozones, or its literature. We are affected by many of its qualities simultaneously. I think of Douglas LePan's description of Shield country, where "angels alone would see it whole and one"; stepping out of disciplinary corridors allows us to see the whole. At Dalhousie most

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of the courses in “Canadian Studies” are simply those cross-listed with other departments, from comparative religion to theatre. But I think this results in the very best kind of Arts degree, for its breadth and diversity.

- I was reminded of this in August 2006 when Dalhousie played host to the week-long summer seminar for the International Council for Canadian Studies (ICCS). Participants from Bosnia, Belgium, Mexico, Israel, Russia, and elsewhere listened to Lesley Choyce and Herménégilde Chiasson; visited Lunenburg and Grand Pré; attended sessions on media at the CBC, on federalism at Province House, and defence on HMCS *Fredericton* (a thrill more for the hosts, I think, since civilians are rarely allowed on the base). An historian’s take on “Atlantic Canada” would have been too limiting, probably would have talked too much about fish, and would have underestimated the role Canada plays on the world stage today.
- While interdisciplinary research has become the norm (très fashionable in grant applications), other programs—like Atlantic Canadian Studies or Acadian Studies, for example, here in Nova Scotia—are defined by cultural realities rather than political ones. They have not made the study of the nation-state redundant. As Philip Buckner once argued in *Acadiensis*, we hold multiple identities, and belong to these different groups, simultaneously. Still, I suspect, Canadian Studies thrives best in the old Laurentian heartland, less troubled by contradictory regionalisms.
- The usual refrain in this country—trotted out for November 11 or July 1—is that nobody knows or cares about Canadian history. Somebody tell that to the Danes. And to the network of Canadian Studies centres throughout Europe. I couldn’t believe the depth of interest in Canada *outside* of Canada. The

usual reaction when I told other Canadians I went to Aarhus (besides “Where?”) was “Why on earth would Danes care?” Molson Joe notwithstanding, our national insecurity over our international influence is at best naïve, and at worst, dangerously limiting. Even the network of international scholarship is a terrific resource. For example, I’m part of a research team studying tourism on the North American seaboard: a collaboration of Danes, Canadians, and Americans.

- It sounds trite, but an external perspective makes you think about things differently. Immigration had only ever been an abstract concept to me; as a fourth-generation Canadian, multiculturalism meant a fifth-grade report on “The Scots in Canada” or colourful posters from the federal government. Danes, however, kept asking me, “Where are you from?” As an *emigrant* nation—and one whose monarchy can trace its lineage to the 10th century—residence from 1904 didn’t count as ethnic identity. (In fact, my great-great-grandmother was born in Nykobing, not two hours from Aarhus, in 1866.) More generally, studying Canada in isolation—from the inside, well, in—prevents us from drawing on other experiences. Denmark, for example, borders a much larger country (one that, in the past two centuries, has been by turns hostile and acquisitive) and, now, the polyglot European Union. This proximity has heightened anxieties about the survival of Danish language and culture. As my Danish students

were quick to point out, the parallels between Canada and the United States, and between Quebec and English Canada, aren’t that far off the mark.

- The field isn’t without its limitations. As the “expert” Canadianist, I fielded questions on everything from free trade to Inuit land claims, and my answers were often oversimplified and probably ill-informed. When Danes asked me what Canadians thought about our presence in Afghanistan, I couldn’t believe I was supposed to answer for my entire country. I noticed this again last summer, in the questions posed by the ICCS participants. Canadianists at home seek out locality and difference—regional, ethnic, class; Canadianists abroad try to distill singular national qualities.

ENTHUSIASM FOR CANADA

And yet, this may turn out to be Canadian Studies’ secret weapon. To the question “Has it won the battles it set out to do in the 1960s and 1970s?": has it resolved endemic questions of identity and unity? No—but working with Canadianists from abroad ignites my latent patriotism. I blush to admit this; after all, patriotism is one of those sentiments that, as academics, we are supposed to dissect or suppress. But their enthusiasm for *my* country, for the whole, and for its potential, is truly infectious.

As a relative newcomer to the field, I think it needs some advertising. The Canadian academy is experiencing a remarkable turnover. (This was the situation in Denmark, too; I was hired to bridge the year between the retirement

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15. Denis Stairs, "Canada and the New World Order" in *Canada and the New World Order: Facing the New Millennium*, eds. Michael J. Tucker, Raymond B. Blake, and P.E. Bryden (Toronto: Irwin, 2000), pp. 1-15.
16. Thomas F. Pettigrew, "Reactions Toward the New Minorities of Western Europe" *American Review of Sociology*, 24 (1998), pp. 77-103.
17. International Labour Office, International Organization for Migration, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *International Migration, Racism, Discrimination and Xenophobia* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 2001), p. [I].
18. Yaseem Abu Laban, "For Export: Multiculturalism and Globalization," in *Profiles of Canada*, eds. K.G. Pryke and W.C. Soderlund, 3rd ed. (Toronto: CSPI, 2003), pp. 249-277.
19. Kymlicka, supra note 13, *Finding Our Way*.
20. Stairs, supra note 15, "Canada and the New World Order."
21. Daniel Drache, *Borders Matter: Homeland Security and the Search for North America* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2004).
22. George J. De Benedetti, "Reflections on the Tenth Anniversary of the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement," in Tucker, Blake, and Bryden, *Canada and the New World Order*, supra note 15, pp. 151-62.
23. Mary Vipond, *The Mass Media in Canada* 3rd ed. (Toronto: Lorimer, 2000), pp. 24-29.
24. Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2000), especially chapter 5.
25. For an overview, see the essays in David Taras, Frits Pannekoek, and Maria Bakardjieva, eds., *How Canadians Communicate* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2003).
26. For case studies, see Taris, Pannekoek, Bakardjieva, *How Canadians Communicate*, *ibid.* A nuanced treatment of one Canadian cultural sector is Ted Madger, *Canada's Hollywood: The Canadian State and Feature Films* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).
27. W.H. New, *Borderlands: How We Talk About Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1998).
28. Michael Adams, *Fire and Ice: The United States, Canada and the Myth of Converging Values* (Toronto: Penguin, 2004).
29. The Canadian Democratic Audit, for example, organized by the Centre for Canadian Studies at Mount Allison under the direction of Dr. Bill Cross, explored the degree to which the ideal of democracy was realized in Canadian political practice. For further information on the Canadian Democratic Audit, see Centre for Canadian Studies, Mount Allison University, "The Canadian Democratic Audit," http://www.mta.ca/faculty/arts-letters/canadian_studies/cda/index.html (accessed 13 September 2007).

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of the program's founder and the hiring of its new director.) Just like undergraduates, young academics need to be reassured that it is a teachable and a recognized field of study. The dramatic opposition to the proposed cuts to funding for Canadian Studies abroad in the summer of 2006 was an encouraging

sign: scholars at all stages of their careers recognize its importance. An artifact of third-pillar internationalism, perhaps, but this is one thing from the 1970s that hasn't gone out of style. 🌟

Notes

1. J.B. Tyrell, ed., *David Thompson's Narra-*

tive of His Explorations in Western America 1784-1812 (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1916).

2. Catharine Parr Traill, *The Backwoods of Canada: Being Letters from an Emigrant Officer, Illustrative of the Domestic Economy of British America* (London: C. Knight, 1836).

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- ties and Colleges of Canada, 1984), p. 3. See also the abridged version of *To Know Ourselves*, T.H.B. Symons, *The Symons Report* (Toronto, Book and Periodical Development Council: distributed by McClelland & Stewart, 1978).
2. I see two parallel and overlapping projects: Canadian Studies as an interdisciplinary area of study, with its own programs, projects, and publications and Canadianist research focusing on Canada and on

- Canada in comparative and global perspective. The latter may be consciously disciplinary, but it still contributes to the Canadian Studies project.
3. Very small amounts exist now. For example, the ACS currently has \$5,000 a year for student conferences, to be shared across the nation.
4. Himani Bannerji, "On the Dark Side of Nation: The Politics of Multiculturalism and the State of Canada," *Journal of Can-*

adian Studies, 31:1 (1996), pp. 103-28.

5. *Bowling for Columbine* (dir. Michael Moore, Alliance Atlantis Communications, 2002).
6. Ann Curthoys, "We've Just Started Making National Histories and Now You Want Us to Stop Already?" in *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking With and Through the Nation*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 70-90.