

THE FORCES OF GEOGRAPHY

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CANADIANS, with their customary optimism, may think that the fate of their civilization is in their own hands. So it is. But this young nation, struggling to be itself, must shape its course with an eye to three conditions so familiar that their significance can too easily be ignored. Canada has a small and scattered population in a vast area; this population is clustered along the rim of another country many times more populous and of far greater economic strength; a majority of Canadians share their mother tongue with that neighbour, which leads to peculiarly close and intimate relations. One or two of these conditions will be found in many modern countries. But Canada alone possesses all three. What is their effect, good or bad, on what we call Canadianism?

2. The vast resources of our country are obviously a material advantage although a somewhat perilous one in this age. The intangible qualities of our sprawling mass of territory also have their consequences. Canada's scattered regions are dominated by the mysterious expanses of the Canadian Shield, with the still more mysterious Arctic beyond, pressing down and hemming in the areas of civilized life. No feeling person could be unaffected by the stark beauty of our hinterland. It has moved the artist as well as the prospector. Through the painters and poets who have interpreted their country with force and originality, Canadians have a quiet pride in what even in this overcrowded twentieth century world is still "the great lone land".

3. Along with attachment to the whole of the country with its receding distances goes the sturdy self-reliance of local communities. These are separated by both geography and history. In all our travels we were impressed by differences of tradition and atmosphere in regions such as the Atlantic Provinces, the Prairies and British Columbia. The very existence of these differences contributes vastly to "the variety and richness of Canadian life" and promises a healthy resistance to the standardization which is so great a peril of modern civilization. There is nothing in this antagonistic to a Canadian spirit. On the contrary, it has been as

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essential in the inspiration of artist and poet as has been the massive Canadian landscape. Canadian civilization is all the stronger for its sincere and unaffected regionalism.

4. On the other hand, the isolations of this vast country exact their price. "Art is a communication." Even in acknowledging what the artist has done to create a Canadian spirit, we are reminded that he must be able to reach his community, and that he must have some intercourse with colleagues and critics if he is to do good work. Moreover, he must have the material support which as a rule only a concentrated community can give. Canada has bound herself together with expensive links of physical communication, but these exact a tax which the artist can bear even less easily than can trade and industry. This problem was discussed before us at length especially by some representative groups on the Pacific Coast; there, as in the Maritimes, people understand the cost of isolation.

5. Even the everyday activities of civilized life suffer. In a country small in area and compact in population, national organizations of painting, letters, music, architecture, drama and of other such activities are relatively simple to create and maintain. In Canada all national gatherings for whatever purpose, are costly in time and money; yet our regionalism makes them doubly necessary. It would be easy to give many concrete instances of worthy organizations whose activities lack energy and coherence merely because they want the resources for a permanent secretary and for regular, well attended meetings. Commercial organizations realize the problem and pay the price. Voluntary societies realize the problem too, but without adequate resources they must resign themselves to a limited effectiveness.

6. This isolation imposed by the conditions of our life affects the work of government institutions also. In a country such as ours where many people are remote from the national capital and from other large centres of population, it is of obvious importance to extend to them as far as may be possible the services of the national institutions in Ottawa. This was a point freely admitted by all except a few metropolitan groups with strong urban preoccupations. Our national institutions operating on a restricted budget and preoccupied with their immediate task are sometimes in danger of confusing Canada with Ottawa. This danger, those who live at a distance and who know the need of national services, are quick to notice. "It was with considerable amusement", said a group from the Prairies, "that we read under the heading National Museum . . . that 'It is centrally located and readily reached by bus and street car' . . . We ask if we can be expected to take this statement seriously?"¹ The good-natured joke was preliminary to a helpful discussion of what such a national institution could do for the rest of Canada. The responsibility is

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obvious and is fully accepted. The difficulty is a measure of the cost of our size and shape.

7. But apart from these problems of dispersal we face, for the most part without any physical barriers, a vast and wealthy country to which we are linked not only by language but by many common traditions. Language and tradition link us also with two mother countries. But from these we are geographically isolated. On this continent, as we have observed, our population stretches in a narrow and not even continuous ribbon along our frontier--fourteen millions along a five thousand mile front. In meeting influences from across the border as pervasive as they are friendly, we have not even the advantages of what soldiers call defence in depth.

8. From these influences, pervasive and friendly as they are, much that is valuable has come to us, as we shall have occasion to observe repeatedly in this chapter and indeed throughout this entire survey: gifts of money spent in Canada, grants offered to Canadians for study abroad, the free enjoyment of all the facilities of many institutions which we cannot afford, and the importation of many valuable things which we could not easily produce for ourselves. We have gained much. In this preliminary stock-taking of Canadian cultural life it may be fair to inquire whether we have gained a little too much.

9. We are thus deeply indebted to American generosity. Money has flowed across the border from such groups as the Carnegie Corporation, which has spent \$7,346,188 in Canada since 1911 and the Rockefeller Foundation, to which we are indebted for the sum of \$11,817,707 since 1914.² There are other institutions from whose operations we benefit such as the Guggenheim Foundation and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Through their generosity countless individuals have enjoyed opportunities for creative work or for further cultivation of their particular field of study. Applied with wisdom and imagination, these gifts have helped Canadians to live their own life and to develop a better Canadianism. Libraries given to remote rural areas or to poorly endowed educational institutions are another example of the great diversity of our neighbour's broad benevolence. Many institutions in Canada essential to the equipment of a modern nation could not have been established or maintained without money provided from the United States. In addition, the scholarships and fellowships awarded to Canadian students in American universities without any discrimination, represent an impressive contribution to the advanced training of our young men and women of promise.

10. Of American institutions we make the freest use, and we are encouraged to do so by the similarities in our ways of life and by the close and friendly personal relations between scholars as individuals and

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in groups. Not only American universities and graduate schools but specialized schools of all sorts (library schools, schools of art, of music and dramatics) great national institutions (libraries, museums, archives, centres of science and learning) --all are freely placed at our disposal.³ We use various American information services as if they were our own, and there are few Canadian scholars who do not belong to one or more American learned societies.

11. Finally, we benefit from vast importations of what might be familiarly called the American cultural output. We import newspapers, periodicals, books, maps and endless educational equipment. We also import artistic talent, either personally in the travelling artist or company, or on the screen, in recordings and over the air. Every Sunday, tens of thousands tacitly acknowledge their cultural indebtedness as they turn off the radio at the close of the Sunday symphony from New York and settle down to the latest American Book of the Month.

12. Granted that most of these American donations are good in themselves, it does not follow that they have always been good for Canadians. We have not much right to be proud of our record as patrons of the arts. Is it possible that, beside the munificence of a Carnegie or a Rockefeller, Canadian contributions look so small that it seems hardly worth while making them? Or have we learned, wrongly, from our neighbour an unnecessary dependence on the contributions of the rich? A similar unworthy reliance on others appears in another field. Canada sends a number of students abroad, many of them on fellowships provided by other countries; Canada offers very few of her own fellowships to non-Canadians, none at all until very recently. Perhaps we have been tempted by a too easy benevolence, but this leaves us in an undignified position, unworthy of our real power and prestige.

13. Canada has, moreover, paid a heavy price for this easy dependence on charity and especially on American charity. First, many of our best students, on completing their studies at American institutions, accept positions there and do not return. The United States wisely relaxes its rigid immigration laws for all members of "learned professions" and profits accordingly. Our neighbours, able to take their choice of the foreign students attracted to their universities by far-seeing generosity, naturally choose many Canadians, partly because they are there in such numbers, partly because they fit in more readily with American ways than do others.

14. In consideration of American generosity in educating her citizens Canada "sells down south" as many as 2,500 professional men and women in a year.⁴ Moreover, Canada by her too great dependence on American fellowships for advanced study, particularly in the humanities and social studies, has starved her own universities which lack not only money but the community of scholarship essential to the best work. ". . . American gen-

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erosity has blinded our eyes to our own necessities. Culturally we have feasted on the bounty of our neighbours, and then we ask plaintively what is wrong with our progress in the arts." So runs a comment in the brief of the National Conference of Canadian Universities.⁵

15. This impoverishment of Canadian universities for want of effort to keep our scholars at home, brings us to the whole question of our dependence on the United States for the satisfaction of so many non-material needs. Few Canadian [*sic*] realize the extent of this dependence. We know that if some disaster were to cut off our ready access to our neighbours, our whole economic life would be dislocated; but do we realize our lack of self-reliance in other matters?

16. Such a catastrophe for instance would no doubt hasten the establishment of the National Library so long overdue, but without many bibliographical aids now coming to us from the United

States this would be very difficult, and the library would be deprived of countless invaluable Canadian books now available only in the United States. Moreover, it would be difficult to staff it properly without the facilities for advanced library training not found in Canada. The National Conference of Canadian Universities would no doubt make hasty plans for developing and expanding the few adequate schools of graduate studies which we now possess in view of the expense of sending large numbers of students to England or France. The development of many various specialized schools in the arts would be essential. Extensive provision would have to be made also for advanced study, research, and publication in the humanities and social studies as these are now almost wholly supported by American bounty. One Canadian body in this field indeed derives its entire support from the United States.

17. In this general picture of American influence on our cultural life it is perhaps permissible to mention that it extends to an extraordinary degree into an area beyond the limits of our inquiry, but closely related to it. Teachers from English-speaking Canada who wish to improve their talents or raise their professional status almost automatically make their pilgrimage to Teachers' College at Columbia University or to one of half a dozen similar institutions. They return to occupy senior positions in elementary and high schools and to staff our normal schools and colleges of education. How many Canadians realize that over a large part of Canada the schools are accepting tacit direction from New York that they would not think of taking from Ottawa? On the quality of this direction it is not our place to pronounce, but we may make two general observations: first, Americans themselves are becoming restive under the regime; second, our use of American institutions, or our lazy, even abject, imitation of them has caused an uncritical acceptance of ideas and assumptions which are alien to our tradition. But for Ameri-

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can hospitality we might, in Canada, have been led to develop educational ideas and practices more in keeping with our own way of life.

18. It may be added that we should also have been forced to produce our own educational materials--books, maps, pictures and so forth. As it is, the dependence of English-speaking Canada on the United States for these publications is excessive. In the elementary schools and high schools the actual texts may be produced in Canada, but teachers complain that far too much of the supplementary material is American with an emphasis and direction appropriate for American children but unsuitable for Canadian. As an illustration of the unsuitability of even the best American material, the statement was made in one of our briefs that out of thirty-four children in a Grade VIII class in a Canadian school, nineteen knew all about the significance of July 4 and only seven could explain that of July 1.

19. In our universities the situation is very much more serious. The comparative smallness of the Canadian university population, and the accessibility of American publishing houses with their huge markets has resulted in an almost universal dependence on the American product. It is interesting that a vigorous complaint of American text books should come from a scientist:

"Where personalities and priorities are in question, American writings are very much biased in favour of the American. This is not to suggest that the facts will be distorted, but by mentioning the American names and industries and omitting mention of any others, a very unbalanced picture can be given. To subject Canadian students year in and year out to these influences is not particularly good for the growth of a wholesome Canadianism."⁶

20. In other fields, the complaint may be not so much one of bias as of emphasis. In history, for example, dependence on the United States for source books and text books makes it difficult for history departments to plan any courses not generally taught in American universities. Junior courses in Canadian history present particular problems because American publishers do not find

an adequate market for books and maps in that field. It must be emphasized that we have benefited greatly from many American productions; but because we have left the whole field to our neighbour our own special needs are not supplied.

21. Although in French-speaking Canada the difference in language offers some measure of protection, elsewhere in Canada the uncritical use of American training institutions, and therefore of American educational philosophy and what are referred to as teaching aids, has certainly tended to make our educational systems less Canadian, less suited to our traditions, less appreciative of the resources of our two cultures. It has also meant--and this is a matter with which we have a direct concern--that a large number of our leading teachers who are not only teachers

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but community leaders have received the final and often the most influential part of their training in the United States. This training may be excellent in itself, but it is surely permissible to wish that men and women who are going to exercise such a powerful influence on Canadian life should meet and work in some institution which, however international its staff may be, could put Canadian interests and problems in the first place.

22. The problem of text books just mentioned shows how American imports may harm as well as help us. But this is only part of the larger problem of vast cultural importations. Elsewhere in this Report we refer to concert tours in Canada organized beyond our borders. These are good in so far as they enable Canadians to hear artists eminent in the musical world. But, to hear the recognized artists, subscribers must also support many who are unknown and who, we are told, could not compete with Canadian talent if they were not supported by these powerful organizations. The unfortunate Canadian artist to get placed must go across the line, not the most happy solution for him or for his community.

23. Every intelligent Canadian acknowledges his debt to the United States for excellent films, radio programmes and periodicals. But the price may be excessive. Of films and radio we shall speak in more detail later, but it may be noted in passing that our national radio which carries the Sunday symphony from New York also carries the soap-opera. In the periodical press we receive indeed many admirable American journals but also a flood of others much less admirable which, as we have been clearly told, is threatening to submerge completely our national product:

"A Canadian culture with an English-French background," so runs the brief of the *Société des Ecrivains Canadiens*, "will never reach the level which we desire so long as suitable measures are not taken against the invasion of the Canadian press by one of the most detestable products of the American press, so long as thousands of pages *Made in United States* are slavishly reproduced by English language papers or translated for French-speaking readers, so long as pulp magazines and other works of the same nature enter or are distributed in Canada without any restriction, as is now the case."^z

24. The Canadian Periodical Press Association tells the same tale. Although during the last generation our periodicals have maintained and greatly strengthened their position, the competition they face has been almost overwhelming. Canadian magazines with much difficulty have achieved a circulation of nearly forty-two millions a year as against an American circulation in Canada of over eighty-six millions. "Canada . . . is the only country of any size in the world," one of their members has observed, "whose people read more foreign periodicals than they do

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periodicals published in their own land, local newspapers excluded."⁸ The Canadian periodical cannot in its turn invade the American market; for Americans, it seems, simply do not know enough about Canada to appreciate Canadian material. Our periodicals cannot hold their own except in their limited and unprotected market, nine million English-speaking readers. These must be set against the one hundred and sixty millions served by their competitors in the whole North American continent.⁹

25. The American invasion by film, radio and periodical is formidable. Much of what comes to us is good and of this we shall be speaking presently. It has, however, been represented to us that many of the radio programmes have in fact no particular application to Canada or to Canadian conditions and that some of them, including certain children's programmes of the "crime" and "horror" type, are positively harmful. News commentaries too, and even live broadcasts from American sources, are designed for American ears and are almost certain to have an American slant and emphasis by reason of what they include or omit, as well as because of the opinions expressed. We think it permissible to record these comments on American radio since we observe that in the United States many radio programmes and American broadcasting in general have recently been severely criticized. It will, we think, be readily agreed that we in Canada should take measures to avoid in our radio, and in our television, at least those aspects of American broadcasting which have provoked in the United States the most out-spoken and the sharpest opposition.¹⁰

26. American influences on Canadian life to say the least are impressive. There should be no thought of interfering with the liberty of all Canadians to enjoy them. Cultural exchanges are excellent in themselves. They widen the choice of the consumer and provide stimulating competition for the producer. It cannot be denied, however, that a vast and disproportionate amount of material coming from a single alien source may stifle rather than stimulate our own creative effort; and, passively accepted without any standard of comparison, this may weaken critical faculties. We are now spending millions to maintain a national independence which would be nothing but an empty shell without a vigorous and distinctive cultural life. We have seen that we have its elements in our traditions and in our history; we have made important progress, often aided by American generosity. We must not be blind, however, to the very present danger of permanent dependence.

Source: Canada. *Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters, and Sciences*. (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1951). Reproduced from the National Library of Canada's website, www.nlc-bnc.ca.