

After Canada: On Amnesia and Apocalypse in the Contemporary Crisis

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REVIEW ESSAYS/NOTES CRITIQUES

After Canada: On Amnesia and Apocalypse in the Contemporary Crisis

AFTER CANADA. Canadians and Québécois huddle by their bonfires in the gathering darkness, warmed by wavering flames and unwavering certainties. They find comfort in magic and nostalgia — in hearing once more the cherished legends and songs of childhood and youth, tales of villainy and heroism, epic moments and missed opportunities. But some also suspect, at some level, that they are singing their songs in a foreign land, a post-Canadian terrain, shaped by a post-Referendum (or post-1976 or -1965 or -1945) process of dissolution whose paradoxical decisiveness has only slowly become apparent. They — we — sense, at some level, that the landscape surrounding our brave bonfire is that of the former Canada, that the narratives, institutions, flags, anthems, sports, legends and personalities that all once offered us a reassurance that we belong to a time and place, that allowed us to have a “We” separate from the “They”, have faded and even disappeared. Many of these myths and symbols we barely remember; others we can see, on the far side of the Rubicon we crossed in 1995, perhaps without fully realizing that we were doing so. Outside its half-life in commercial messages, synthetic events and official self-celebration — all of which have become more and more stridently fervent precisely to the extent that the Canadian nationalism they are designed to invoke is no longer available — the complex of myths and symbols through which Canada was once constructed is visibly coming undone. Our brave bonfire songs and speeches fall into vast cavernous silences. Much of what we had once believed, many of the signs that had once spoken of an (illusory) national permanence and continuity over time, linger as shadows in a pre-millennial twilight. “I am Canadian” echoes weakly today — as a slogan from a beer commercial.

The vast library on the Canadian Crisis is an indication of this curious and explosive mixture of certainty and doubt, exaltation and anguish.¹ Here one finds a

1 My thanks to Mike Dawson and Concordia University’s History in the Making Conference for comments and criticisms. This review essay is based on a reading of only three dozen or so of the more recent, and generally English-language, titles focusing on the Crisis of Canada. They include the following: David Bercuson and Barry Cooper, *Deconfederation: Canada Without Quebec* (Toronto, Key Porter Books, 1991); André Binette, *Indépendance et liberté: Une vision du Québec souverain* (St-Rédempteur, Consultants BRAE, 1996); Robert Bothwell, *Canada and Quebec: One Country, Two Histories* (Vancouver, UBC Press, 1995); Pierre Bourgault, *Now or Never: Manifesto for an Independent Quebec* (Toronto, Key Porter Books, 1991); Alan Cairns, *Charter versus Federalism: The Dilemmas of Constitutional Reform* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992); Joseph H. Carens, ed., *Is Quebec Nationalism Just? Perspectives from English Canada* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995); Citizen X, *Who Are The People of Canada Anyway?: Waiting for the Next Referendum* (Toronto, Eastendbooks, 1997); William E. Conklin, *Images of a Constitution* ([1989] Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1993); Ray Conlogue, *Impossible Nation: The Longing for Homeland in Canada and Quebec* (Stratford, Mercury Press, 1996); Susan Delacourt, *United We Fall: In Search of a New Canada* (Toronto, Penguin

profusion of languages and yet few effective translations, a thousand authors and yet only the slightest hint of a (non-conscripted) audience, an infinity of close textual readings and speculations about possible or impossible worlds, yet a shortage of factual representations of the social world we do inhabit. Here, in short, one finds all the symptoms of postmodernity as a condition of life — and yet, of late, there are a few voices which, disregarding the narrative pay-offs of keeping the audience in suspense, announce that the dreaded “it” *has already happened*: that the bi-national, bi-cultural, liberal, egalitarian mythologies in which so many Canadians and Québécois had traced the outlines of their identities have had their day.² Are the crowds around the bonfires, proclaiming in unison the virtues of Us and the evils of

- Canada, 1994); Pierre Fournier, *A Meech Lake Post-Mortem: Is Quebec Sovereignty Inevitable?* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991); Daniel Francis, *National Dreams: Myth, Memory and Canadian History* (Vancouver, Arsenal Press, 1997); Gordon Gibson, *Plan B: The Future of the Rest of Canada* (Vancouver, Fraser Institute, 1994); J.L. Granatstein and Kenneth McNaught, eds., *'English Canada' Speaks Out* (Toronto, Doubleday, 1991); Richard Gwyn, *Nationalism Without Walls: The Unbearable Lightness of Being Canadian* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1995); William Kaplan, *Belonging: The Meaning and Future [sic] of Canadian Citizenship* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993); Jonathan Lemco, *Turmoil in the Peaceable Kingdom: The Quebec Sovereignty Movement and Its Implications for Canada and the United States* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1994); Ged Martin, *Britain and the Origins of Canadian Confederation, 1837-67* (Vancouver, UBC Press, 1995); James N. McCrorie and Martha MacDonald, eds., *The Constitutional Future of the Prairie and Atlantic Regions of Canada* (Regina, Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina, 1992); Kenneth McRoberts and Patrick Monahan, eds., *The Charlottetown Accord, the Referendum, and the Future of Canada* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1993); Kenneth McRoberts, *Misconceiving Canada: The Struggle for National Unity* (Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1997); Peter C. Newman, *The Canadian Revolution: From Deference to Defiance* (Toronto, Penguin Books of Canada, 1995); Philip Resnick, *Thinking English Canada* (Toronto, Stoddart, 1994); A.R. Riggs and Tom Velk, eds., *Federalism in Peril: National Unity, Free Markets, and the Emerging Global Economy* (Vancouver, The Fraser Institute, 1992); Peter H. Russell, *Constitutional Odyssey: Can Canadians Be a Sovereign People?* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1992); John Ralston Saul, *Reflections of a Siamese Twin: Canada at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Toronto, Viking, 1997); Jeffrey Simpson, *Faultlines: Struggling for a Canadian Vision* (Toronto, HarperCollins, 1993); Paul M. Sniderman et al., eds., *The Clash of Rights: Liberty, Equality, and Legitimacy in Pluralist Democracy* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1996); Charles Taylor, *Reconciling the Solitudes: Essays on Canadian Federalism and Nationalism* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993); Jeremy Webber, *Reimagining Canada: Language, Culture, Community, and the Canadian Constitution* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994); and Reg Whitaker, *A Sovereign Idea: Essays on Canada as a Democratic Community* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992). Page references refer to these editions. The elitism of the crisis — a debate about sovereignty conducted with due decorum in two official languages but which by the very abstractness of its language excludes average citizens, i.e., the projected holders of sovereignty — is exemplified by the sheer impossibility of any Canadian or Québécois ever reading more than a tiny, doubtless unrepresentative sample of the texts generated by this extremely complex phenomenon. The crisis is essentially unmappable; with the passage of time, of course, all of its “events” — nights of knives, guillotine-blades (couperets) to the throat, etc. — will be reconstructed and re-imagined to fit the surviving and perhaps mutually antagonistic national myth-symbol complexes as they struggle with each other for hegemony in northern North America.
- 2 Within this literature, the “after Canada” theme is most cogently explored in Conlogue, *Impossible Nation*, Francis, *National Dreams*, Lemco, *Turmoil in the Peaceable Kingdom* and “Citizen X”, *Who Are the People of Canada Anyway?* By publishing his book anonymously, “Citizen X” has added to the melodramatic atmosphere surrounding the crisis.

Them, ready to attend to these voices?

Everywhere in this library of polemic and analysis one finds international examples: the rival camps delight in drawing parallels between their opponents and the most extremist of modern movements, from Nazism to Balkan nationalism to Islamic fundamentalism.³ In this climate of global parallel-mongering, one hesitates to draw a further one. Still, if we want to understand what can happen if one takes the framework of an old monarchical empire, and injects into this husk both the new warm breath of nationalism and a universalizing “total” ideology, we could turn to the attempted transformation of the old liberal empire of the north into a “new democratic” Canada; or we could turn to the effort to construct a new, universal yet patriotic “Soviet Man” on the wreckage of old imperial Russia. In both cases, the national/universal projects have unavoidably come to terms with the contradictions inherent in the empires they inherited; in neither case did a program of “official nationalism” (to use a phrase adopted by Benedict Anderson)⁴ succeed over the long term in integrating the new citizens into the new political project.

For many “Canadians” and (interestingly) perhaps also for some “Québécois”, unable to face either a loss of history of this magnitude or the violence threatened by the future, to accept either the loss of Canada or the unlikelihood (under conditions of postmodernity) of a fully self-determining Québec, the present moment is articulated in nationalisms that are weightless, nostalgic and curiously shrill. In the former but nonetheless still bourgeois Canada, the tasteful and circumspect middle-class citizen would be wise to treat history not as a set of pressing problems in the present, but as a series of disconnected and pleasing moments — as a past-time or, more commonly, as a series of picturesque commercials. There are countervailing voices, but one

3 “Nous ne sommes pas la Slovaquie”, the sovereigntist Binette notes of Québec (*Indépendance et liberté*, p. 27), which must stand as one of the very few incontrovertible statements in this polemical literature; he, however, has no hesitation in attributing to Canada a “Belgrade complex” (p. 93). A reductively-conceived “Eastern Europe” functions as a metaphor within texts on both sides. Fournier is convinced, for example, that after their release from Canadian bondage, the Québécois will change their loyalties as swiftly as the newly freed Eastern Europeans (pp. 3-4); Peter C. Newman, *The Canadian Revolution*, likens the mentality of present-day Canadians to that of East Germans toppling statues of Marx in Berlin’s Alexander Platz (p. 79). Yugoslavian parallels have been particularly popular, either (for sovereigntists) to suggest the ultimate fragility of all federations, or (for federalists) to suggest that Québec’s accession to sovereignty will lead to ethnic cleansing. Turkey, Beirut and even Bangladesh (“the ‘Bangladeshization’ [!] of Atlantic Canada” — McRoberts, *Beyond Quebec*, p. 71) have also served their metaphorical purpose. Such parallels are related to the need, under conditions of postmodernity, to connect the Canadian crisis to globalization: the eclipse of Canada, one is almost required to believe, is an event of epic significance in the world, either a base betrayal of its highest humanist hopes, or the fulfillment of its noblest dreams of national self-determination. Actually, most of “the world” is unlikely to notice it.

4 See especially Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York, 1983): “These ‘official nationalisms’ can best be understood as a means for combining naturalization with retention of dynastic power, in particular over the huge polyglot domains accumulated since the Middle Ages; or, to put it another way, for stretching the short, tight skin of the nation over the gigantic body of the empire. ‘Russification’ of the heterogeneous population of the Czar’s subjects thus represented a violent, conscious welding of two opposing political orders, one ancient, one quite new” (pp. 82-83). One could say that Canada was no less an attempt to stretch the short, tight skin of nation over the gigantic body of the British liberal dominion inherited from the 19th century.

wonders about the scope of their audience, as around our bonfires we listen to the truths of our story-tellers, as they one and all describe the inevitability and goodness of our respective nations, and the fiery and apocalyptic ends which will terminate our enemies. And still the darkness gathers, and in the depths of our nostalgia and fierce denials, we struggle to keep the wounds of time at bay, and to overcome the uncanny sadness evoked by the tarnished medals of our old soldiers, our mouldering books of reminiscences and crumbling statues, our fading ideals and faltering memories.

Thirty years or more of the Canadian Crisis have generated a fierce need to mythologize our histories. Some would like to limit this long moment of dissolution by calling it the “constitutional crisis”⁵ (or even more restrictively, “Meech Lake” or “Charlottetown”). But this is misleading: it is more a question of the collapse of the entire postwar myth-symbol complex⁶ without which, inter alia, “Canadian history” cannot function in any of its familiar forms. Many rewards, monetary and symbolic, book contracts and television appearances, await those whose voices are the loudest and tell the best-loved and most familiar tales. So many authorities, fixed and sure in their command of the unchanging Canadian essence and of the Canadian landscape which is its stage, our truth and our destiny, now parade before us. On television and in this literature, we encounter achieved and final identities — the perpetually alienated Westerner, the fervent *nationaliste*, the ardent feminist Charterphile....To be in the former Canada and listen to these voices recalls the pathos of the former East Bloc, where one finds old soldiers earnestly reminding passers-by of the achievements of the Communist Party as they sell their medals. Now that we live in the former Canada, this patch of the globe whose political future was probably decided, at least

5 As Michael A. Walker of the Fraser Institute remarks, in his stereotypically right-wing extremist account of the “costs and benefits” of being Canadian, “The fact [is] that the core of the current unrest in Canada is about the system of government embedded in our constitution...”: Walker, “The Costs and Benefits of Being Canadian”, in Kaplan (p. 266). Other vintage right-wing-extremist versions of the Canadian Crisis, which is often presented very narrowly and scientifically as a mega-problem in business accounting, can be found in the collected constitutional writings of David Bercuson and Barry Cooper, *Deconfederation*, Gordon Gibson, *Plan B* and A. R. Riggs and Tom Velk, *Federalism in Peril*. It speaks volumes about our neo-liberal epoch that such extreme right-wing (and historically threadbare) writing should have attained such legitimacy in public discussion. For an excellent discussion of the synergy between such extremist positions on social and economic policy and the drive to constitutional decentralization, see Whitaker, *A Sovereign Idea* (pp. 320-22).

6 To borrow the term of Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford, 1986). He explains and contextualizes it thus: “What I shall be arguing is that the ‘core’ of ethnicity, as it has been transmitted in the historical record and as it shapes individual experience, resides in this quartet of ‘myths, memories, values and symbols’ and in the characteristic forms or styles and genres of certain historical configurations of populations. Special emphasis is laid on what is termed the ‘myth-symbol’ complex, and particularly the ‘mythomoteur’ or constitutive myth of the ethnic polity; both indicate the vital role of myths and symbols as embodying the corpus of beliefs and sentiments which the guardians of ethnicity preserve, diffuse and transmit to future generations. In other words, the special qualities and durability of *ethnie* [i.e., ethnic communities] are to be found neither in their ecological locations, nor their class configurations, or yet their military and political relationships, important as all these are for day-to-day experiences and medium-term chances of survival of specific ethnic communities. Rather one has to look at the nature (forms and content) of their myths and symbols, their historical memories and central values, which we can summarize as the ‘myth-symbol complex’, at the mechanisms of their diffusion (or lack of it) through a given population, and their transmission to future generations” (p. 15).

in general terms, in the last quarter of the 20th century (no matter how many contorted formulae and constitutional compromises will be attempted in the years to come), such authorities, although they convey almost nothing of value about the challenges confronting those who have no choice but to come after Canada, at least give us the reassurance of a home. At least, we can think as we listen to these familiar voices with their age-old grievances and “positions”, these echoes from the nation-state of our youth — at least not *that* much has changed, at least we have a home to return to.

But everything has changed — since 1975, certainly; since 1995, unmistakably. The myth of a bi-national, bi-cultural, bilingual, liberal democratic welfare state is dead, and it will not be reborn. Many of us have no home and no homeland. The climate is culturally complex, and for realists and skeptics, who will so easily be derided as traitors, perhaps somewhat dangerous. Do not question the story-tellers, most of them nationalists and *nationalistes* of one sort or another, if you value your respectability as a good citizen in this imaginary discursive universe of sound, sensible burghers. Do not question this “Canada” and this “Quebec”, so effortlessly and flawlessly produced, so immensely well-documented, with their birth certificates, evolutionary narratives, heroes and villains, these magical structures which deliver us from our mortality and from our inconsequence. Do not doubt, if you are a loyal “Canadian”, that Canada, founded sometime in the early to mid-19th century through a compact between the two principal European peoples, has from time immemorial been a liberal-democratic nation-state characterized by social inclusiveness and the pursuit of the “middle way”. Do not fail to celebrate, even if you live in Southern Ontario, the northern austerities of “the land” itself,⁷ the humane and generous values upon which we all agree (and which from time before memory have distinguished us from the Americans), our almost infinite flexibility, tolerance and love of honourable compromise.⁸ Do not doubt, if you are a loyal Québécois, that Québec, a nation from time immemorial, has been characterized by the pursuit of collective dreams rather than an individualist liberalism, and that the Québécois have always and everywhere defended their identity against the “English” (or perhaps Canadian?) oppressor. Above all, do not, on either side — and this is quite difficult — find hilarious the endless dichotomization of the trivial, the ceaseless visual confrontations of the maple leaf⁹ and the fleur-de-lis, the transformation of politics to a low-grade soap opera or a junior league hockey game. Do not fail to respect the voices of authority as they resound around you, and do not hesitate to regard the works of the Crisis, the

7 See Daniel Francis, *National Dreams*, on this theme.

8 For the development of this myth in poetic form, see Powe, *A Canada of Light*. It is developed at tedious length in John Ralston Saul, *Reflections of a Siamese Twin*, who attempts an un-nuanced juxtaposition of an “essentially Socratic” Canada with the supposedly monolithically frontier-conquering states of Europe and the United States (p. 102). Curiously, in other works on the Crisis, such as Peter Newman’s *The Canadian Revolution*, the frontier thesis is once more up and running (pp. 364-5). Missing in this literature altogether here is recognition of the cogency, coherence and forcefulness of the liberal project, centered on but not confined to Central Canada, as it assimilated the east, north and west to its aims of capital accumulation, individual property ownership and British law and order.

9 Which, ironically enough actually began its symbolic career on the flags of the independence-minded *Patriotes* of Lower Canada, who, just to complicate our dualisms, called themselves *Canadiens*....

ponderous utterances of a David Bercuson or a Pierre Bourgault, as profound writings of world-historic significance.

As a lapsed Canadian,¹⁰ distant (at least to some extent) from, and suspicious of, most of the narratives of my childhood, I fear the hot breaths and fierce eyes of the faithful, the implacable certainties of so many of these Canadian and Québécois voices in this library of Crisis books. Many of them, perhaps unintentionally, and often with the appearance of the most benign universality and reason, prepare their listeners for violence. For them, Canada and Québec have the obviousness and the clarity of established facts. Canada is a country, a place, an essence, a spirit, above all a great continuity. A continuous national history, as necessary and inevitable as evolution itself, links the first “Canadians” struggling for survival in the Ice Age to today’s “Canadians” shopping at Walmart and eating at Burger King. (Thus, for those of one party, “Canadian” nationalism precedes, logically and chronologically and morally, its Québec antagonist). For both federalists and sovereigntists, Canada is a nation-state among nation-states; and “Canadian history” is obviously about everything that happened within that section of the planet now claimed by this sovereign nation-state. For some, Canada is a model — has not the United Nations said so, we are reminded with such sad insistence! — to the whole world. Or, at the bonfires of the other great orientation, it is also all equally obvious: Québec is a country, a place, an essence, a continuity, a future nation-state among nation-states; “Québec history” is about that which happened within the soon-to-be sovereign territory of Québec, the necessary, inevitable, evolutionary outcome of the Conquest and of ignorant “English Canadian” betrayals of the bi-national compact at the heart of Confederation.

On both sides, then, one finds continuous national histories, myth-symbol complexes with heroes, villains, turning-points and sacred landscapes, and finally the assurance (unless the nation’s Other is successful) of a happy ending. On both sides, historical continuity is secured by “reading back” into time the boundaries and certainties of the present: in the *Historical Atlas of Canada*, even the first nomads from Siberia somehow figure into the Canadian narrative. Ignorant themselves that they were “Canadian”, Marie de l’Incarnation and the Marquis de Montcalm, Alexander Mackenzie and T. C. Haliburton are rebaptised as the ancestors of rival nations. Do not question, do not even notice, these practices, this vast project of using the past as a mine for a nationalism of reassurance, and do not hesitate to reconceptualize whole peoples and subcontinents as moments in the inevitability and goodness of the nation — Canada for most, Québec for the perhaps more

10 An awkward label — but what should we call ourselves, those of us who can no longer, unselfconsciously and without irony, join the circles around the bonfires? Former Soviets can, many of them, simply revert to being, *inter alia*, Russians or Georgians; but, speaking of the “Rest of Canada”, what can we become? “English-Canadians”? Inaccurate, essentialist and myopic: a relic of the old verities of the dualist myth. “Neo-Canadians”? In most ears, notwithstanding the academic renown of “neo-Marxism”, it sounds like a right-wing ideology, and in some usages, it denoted only recent immigrants. “Former Canadians”? — too much like an obituary. “Ex-Canadians”? — too much like either snow-birds or expatriates. “Post-Canadians”? — but one recoils before inflicting another “post-” on the world. At least from the subject-position of the “lapsed Canadian” one discerns a possibility that, after Canada, we may well have to go “after Canada” yet again, albeit one very differently defined than any of its predecessors.

discriminating palate. To do without this continuity is to do without the reassurances of understanding and identity. It is to live without the security and certainty of a country. And therein lies the difficulty of becoming a lapsed Canadian.

We face the worst crisis in our history, Canadians and Québécois are told so often and so emphatically. From an alternative point of view, however, it would be more correct to say we confront the crisis *of* Canadian history, as a nation-born-of-empire dissolves into the constituent contradictions which, left unresolved and even unnoticed at the time of the project's initiation (i.e., primarily in the third quarter of the 20th century) have made the project of Canadian history impossible.¹¹ In its absence, we have myth-symbol complexes whose self-interested procedures for the generation of truths preclude the historians' preoccupation with questions of evidence. We live fictitiously (and if we are posing as postmoderns, we attempt to celebrate this weightlessness along with Canada's "fluidity" and "undecidability"); the "Canada" we inhabit, this place and this cultural essence, is beyond history and evidence. Or, better, this "Canada" is a whole, an ideal, whose completeness is now compromised by its enemies without and within.

The abundant literature on the Crisis repeats this imagery to the point of exhaustion — we have been asked *Must Canada Fail?* too many times; and visually, we have been assaulted by torn maple leaves, shattered three-dimensional maps, even towering lettering of a style more commonly associated with the latest horror movie. (Given the Fraser Institute provenance of so much of this violently right-wing material, the slasher-flick typography has a certain weird appropriateness).¹² On the other side, Québécois are repeatedly told, "It's now or never"¹³ although this "now" seems remarkably durable. To refuse to be alarmed by this propaganda of apocalypse is to confess to emotional autism in the company of well-practised, even professional, hysterics. To be a lapsed Canadian is to be ill-at-ease in this entire discussion.

11 The vocabulary with which we are saddled — that of "Canada", "Canadians", and so on — makes it difficult for us to think our way into the discontinuities of our history. The very terms have historically been contested terrain. Mackenzie King's policy of independence-by-inches, the extraordinary persistence of imperial forms and identifications, and the institutional continuities — parliament, senate, common law, and so on — makes it easy to conflate the 19th-century imperial Dominion of Canada with Canada as a liberal democratic project. Yet at a higher level of magnification, the discontinuities between the old dominion and the new democracy — the "two Canadas" — registered in such fields as the franchise, hegemonic ideology, the role of Ottawa, and the invention of citizenship (a moment whose cultural importance and originality are only glancingly treated in Kaplan, ed., *Belonging*) are striking, as is the significance of the years 1945-1965. A new paradigm would refuse the temptations of the mythologies of continuous national history.

12 See Gibson, *Plan B*, and especially Riggs and Velk, *Federalism in Peril*. The excitement aroused by the lurid covers quickly evaporates as one endures the contents of these monotonous works of neo-liberal propaganda. Incidentally, we can only hope that there are no Gramscians among the people who design these lurid covers — for the fable of the mutilated beaver in the *Prison Notebooks* seems almost diabolically well-suited to the purposes of the Crisis industry.

13 To cite the title of Pierre Bourgault's memorable polemic, *Now or Never*, which also develops its theme of urgency via sporting metaphors: "The main opponent is on the canvas, Ottawa and English Canada have been KOed, and it'll take them some time before they're back on their feet again" (p. 5). This is fortunate from his point of view, since after "all the frustration and hatred built up on both sides for the past 200 years" surfaced in the wake of Meech and "the eminently artificial nature of Canada" now stands revealed (p. 38). What one does in an athletic event in which one's opponent mutates into other entities altogether cannot be imagined in this athletic dualist/duellist framework.

And yet, despite or because of all the certainties we express about the past and the future, despite the intensity of the bonfire circles as they chant and sing the truths that the lapsed can no longer identify as their own, the darkness gathers. Is there safety in numbers? Perhaps not, if so much of what is chanted around our fires concerns the deep evil of Them and the spotless innocence of Us. Perhaps not, if so much of it is factually wrong — and carelessness with historical fact characterizes this Crisis, not as an incidental but an intrinsic aspect of its functioning.¹⁴ Perhaps not, if so much of this literature suggests that within the former Canada one ethnic group or another bears the burden of being the country's "essence"¹⁵ (the other ethnicities, nationalisms and identities thereby becoming either oppressively hegemonic or derisively marginal). We live in a time when the historians' pathetic little "facts", derided from both left and right, yield to the nationalists' grand myths. Freed from the drab and mundane world of Canadian political history, we are free to explore the exalted rhetoric of violence. And we are being prepared for a violence that, quite apart from the critique one might make of it on ethical or religious grounds, is also susceptible to

14 Thus in *Deconfederation*, Bercuson and Cooper assure us, in a voice which brooks no contradiction, that every prime minister from Macdonald to Trudeau agreed that Quebec, however culturally distinct, must not enjoy a special legal status within Confederation (p. 101), which is odd given the province's distinct civil code and the provision made for Québec representation on the Supreme Court (even to the point of "discriminating" among the judges as to which may hear cases arising from the province's civil code). Among the philosophers, meanwhile, there seems to be a bizarre conviction that liberalism and nationalism have historically been antithetical (Carens, *Is Quebec Nationalism Just?* p. 4); one is also surprised to learn from them that in Quebec's Eastern Townships English Canadians predominate (p. 164). John Ralston Saul is convinced that the vast majority of the adult male inhabitants of British North America enjoyed the right to vote from the early 19th century on, which goes to show the depth and continuity of "Canada's" democratic roots (*Reflections of Siamese Twin*, p. 133). He also expresses great admiration for Laurier's speech in 1880 — remarkably prescient, even for him! — in response to the Second Riel Rebellion (p. 216). He describes Séguin's 1968 *L'Idée d'indépendance au Québec* as being prefaced by a former senior PQ MNA — a seniority attained with record rapidity, since the PQ was only founded in 1968 (p. 311). And finally he flatly declares that "we have always been a middle-class democracy" (p. 469), which makes deeply mysterious the constitutional design of the Senate and the exclusion of women, Amerindians and other groups from the franchise for much of Canadian history.

15 The orthodox and problematical doctrine that Québec was, more than other forces or factors, at the dynamic centre of Canadian history poses particular problems for Québec nationalists. On the one hand, one wishes to assert that Québec was the heart and soul of Canada, that Québécois understood Confederation better than other Canadians, and as the political and psychic heart of Canada, made a decisive, formative contribution to the shape of the Canadian project (see on this Binette, *Indépendance et liberté*, p. 93); but one also wants to argue that Canada was always a colonial project, that Confederation was an imposition on Québec, and that the Canadian project devolved rather than evolved (Binette, pp. 94-5). Gwyn argues that without Quebec, Canada would lose its "psychic essence" (*Nationalism Without Walls*, p. 302); Saul believes that Quebec and francophone Canada "is at the very heart of the Canadian mythology" (*Reflections of a Siamese Twin*, p. 293). B. W. Powe goes so far as to rhapsodize about the Quebec/Canada relationship in sexual terms: "Quebec needs Canada because Quebec provides sparks of challenge, a current of passion, while Canada provides fields, larger contexts for the passion. One without the other would enfeeble the whole, leaving in pieces the traces of the grander latent scheme, the light state, fixed yet unfixed, a new kind of collage country, made of aboriginal dream songs and fierce polemics, private visions and media publicity, the first country to peacefully absorb the swing and shock that accompanies the electric infusion, the processing of fire" (p. 6-7). Reading these words about hearts, passions, electricity and penetrating infusions, can one doubt that constitutional porn is just around the corner?

an aesthetic denunciation: this will be a stupid, pointless, banal, miniature, silly little violence; we shall destroy each other over causes that will never make the back pages of the world's newspapers.¹⁶ And, in anticipatory retrospect, some burden of responsibility for this outcome will rest on the shoulders of the loyal Canadians and Québécois who write so many of these volumes, discretely or otherwise dripping with venom.¹⁷ At the very least, one would recommend, to readers susceptible to the violent magic of nationalist imagery, that they demand to be told the approximate price in lives entailed by the utopian projects of revanchism and revenge so often floated in these spirited texts.¹⁸

The violence that lies so close to hand around our bonfires, the unanimity that one feels as one recites the long list of the crimes of the Other, exemplify in their own ways the conditions of postmodernity which shape this Crisis.¹⁹ The Crisis places "the real" in question; it relativizes any truth-claims and makes even the concept of "telling the truth" seem distant. So many of the debates involved in this crisis have involved taking positions which cannot be founded even remotely on factual knowledge, concerning events which may never occur. Counterfactualism rules. Many of the sharpest disagreements of the past 30 years have been based on what might or might

16 It is one aspect of the extent of historical erasure required by so many texts of the Crisis that authors on both sides dwell on the extreme unlikelihood of a violent outcome, Canadian history having been such a pacific affair. There is a record of rival nationalisms claiming the same territories that is not altogether reassuring on this point; and a doctrine of Canadian history that stresses its essential non-violence has blocked the memory of wild popular enthusiasm for imperial and religious wars of conquest — an enthusiasm not restricted to the anglophone part of the population — not to mention our vibrant tradition of riots, rebellions and civil disturbances. It would be unwise to bet the house on the viability of the weak thesis of "inherent Canadian pacifism".

17 There are venomous moments to cherish, for connoisseurs of the genre: the nice malice of Bercuson and Cooper's dedication of their fiercely hostile book on *Deconfederation* to René Lévesque; Saul's polemical assault on Lucien Bouchard's mother (!) for her rather mild views of English Canadians as Other (pp. 448-9); and Binette's delightful critique of Amerindian claims to sovereignty and self-determination as a shocking instance of "ethnic nationalism" (p. 53).

18 How many lives would be lost, for example, were the drastic exercises of partitioning periodically floated in the polemical literature actually put in practice? Everyone confidently predicts, of course, not a military occupation but a peaceful transfer of territories, which will produce a land bridge from the Maritimes to Ontario, remove half of Montreal from Québec, etc., or, on the other side, result in Québec's possession of Labrador (more often slyly implied in maps-as-logos than presented as a concrete demand: note Québec's acquisition of Labrador on the back cover of Binette's *Indépendance et liberté*). How peoples who had failed to adjust their constitutional differences in a non-confrontational manner will succeed in amicably exchanging territories and populations closely identified not just with their respective "nations" but also with Amerindians, is rather a mystery.

19 One might refer here to Zygmunt Bauman's description of postmodernity: "It means a shopping mall overflowing with goods whose major use is the joy of purchasing them; and existence that feels like a life-long confinement to the shopping mall. It means the exhilarating freedom to pursue anything and the mind-boggling uncertainty as to what is worth pursuing and in the name of what one should pursue it.... Postmodernity (and in this it differs from modernist culture of which it is the rightful issue and legatee) does not seek to substitute one truth for another, one standard of beauty for another, one life ideal for another. Instead, it splits the truth, the standards and the ideal into already deconstructed and about to be deconstructed. It denies in advance the right of all and any revelation to slip into the place vacated by the deconstructed/discredited rules. It braces itself for a life without truths, standards and ideals". See Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London and New York, 1992), pp. vii, ix.

not happen, what might or might not be read into a text, or even what might or might not be read into the precise *position* of words in a text. We have been wrestling with discursive phantoms — but phantoms made “real” through repetition, fear and faith. The focus (but not the cause) of so much of the Crisis has been a “constitution” which exists not as a stable, verifiable phenomenon but as a perpetually re-imagined ideal in the minds of Supreme Court judges.²⁰ Many of those engaged in the construction of this crisis refer, as if to an ultimate ground of justification, to the facts of globalization, to the imperative of escaping datedness, to their own openness in the face of diversity.²¹ Yet this appeal to “the world” is deceptive, for the rival discourses disdain to reveal any legitimate grounds upon which one might dissent from their representations of reality, and “the world” that emerges through the imposition of their opposed categories is one that suits specific political agendas, and only them. It does not seem an accident that, after reading so many rival predictions and authoritative but conflicting representations, many citizens retreat into a form of “internal exile”. Many — perhaps most — people in Québec and Canada profess a bitter cynicism about the debate. Exhaustion and a profound sense of political powerlessness, interspersed with inexplicable bursts of emotion, characterize postmodern cultural experiences generally, from watching television to going to raves. This passivity may well be deceptive. At moments of high crisis, whipped back into patriotic line by the masters of apocalyptic rhetoric, the believers will rejoin the campfire circles.

There is another, more obvious link that could be explored between the literature of the Crisis and the condition of postmodernity. Particularly around the Canadian bonfire, one is encouraged to celebrate difference, ideological pluralism, fluidity, indecisiveness. It has become an orthodoxy that to be Canadian is to celebrate the unorthodox, to take delight in this crisis, to find joy in Canada’s paradox and “impossibility”.²² Those exploiting this well-worked vein — could they have a professional or even libidinal investment in postponing the climax of the Crisis? — suggest that the postmodernity of Canada is both fascinating and (somehow) liberating. These celebrators of diversity have become (at least in their own minds) World Citizens, master intellectuals who can differentiate with the interminable subtlety of a Hegel between a shallow and a deep diversity,²³ a state-nation and a

20 For a stimulating examination of the epistemological and ontological status of “the Constitution” as it has been interpreted by the Supreme Court, see William E. Conklin, *Images of a Constitution* ([1989] Toronto, 1993). By renaming the British North America Act the “Constitution Act”, the “Patriators of 1982” were able retroactively to give the architects of the Confederation bargain a “constitution” they likely did not realize they had. The word itself was not that frequently used in this context in the 1860s and 1870s.

21 See especially Gwyn, *Nationalism Without Walls*, who proclaims Canada the “world’s first postmodern state” (p. 243) — although he concludes his book, quite traditionally and in vintage panic-stricken mode, with predictions of the lethal effects of separation “to both sides” (p. 295).

22 For a classic formulation see Powe, *A Canada of Light*, p. 152: “...Canada’s very impossibility is its hope and its possibility...”. Keith Spicer has also elaborated on this theme at great length.

23 See Charles Taylor, *Reconciling the Solitudes*, for the ultimate reification of duality as a theme of Canadian history (in a self-assured and very influential book full of grand and misleading historical simplifications). One might ungenerously conclude that a diversity is only deep if it is readily apparent to an intellectual living in Montreal.

nation-state,²⁴ the timeless truths of liberalism and the shallow evasions of “community” and so on and so forth. On Canadian soil, they are intellectual internal exiles, faithful citizens of nowhere but (generally) partisans of a global neo-liberalism.²⁵

Postmodernism as one encounters it in this Crisis seems profoundly ignorant of history. Its historicity seems confined to the ahistorical and decontextualized celebration of the supposed Canadian Art of Compromise. At least two objections arise: it is inaccurate to view the Canadian project as one entailing ideological uncertainty and “compromise”, when there is abundant evidence to suggest the contrary — were the First Nations for instance really subjugated and subordinated through a policy of sensible compromise, or is it more accurate to speak of a consistent, thorough policy of liberalizing political/cultural transformation? And, second, it is at the least unoriginal and inconsistent to insist on bedrock liberal values in the same breath as one celebrates social and ideological heterogeneity as one of the charms of the Dominion — for if the “bedrock values” to which we are obliged to swear allegiance are those of liberalism, this must be the historical outcome of a process through which other values (say, those of the Ultramontanes, Family Compact Tories and Inuit) were subordinated if not eliminated. The primary advantage of the “postmodern tone” is that it creates the sensation of being above the fray. Perhaps these World Citizens have simply built themselves more comfortable bleachers around the same old fires.

There may be ways to think and act in the Crisis that entail neither an Olympian detachment from its “texts” nor an essentialist commitment to its violence. One could imagine a perspective drawing from both traditions, without being reducible to either one. From this perspective we are “After Canada” because Canada is best grasped, not as a place, an essence, a nation or a transcendental ideal, but as a *process* unfolding in time and space — a process which has now irretrievably reached a point of transformation.²⁶ Canadian history does not, from this perspective, entail “all that happened that was important to the inhabitants of northern North America” — a holistic “rethinking [of] Canada” that would somehow produce a narrative speaking equally to straights and gays, men and women, francophones and anglophones, etc., etc. — but rather what happened as part of the hegemonic *process* through which a “Canada” came into being and became a state in northern North America. Against the postmodernists and their curiously repetitive and “orthodox” celebrations of Canadian diffuseness, pluralism, etc., this approach would insist that the *process* of Canada was initially that of instituting, under the aegis of the British Empire, a *liberal order* in

24 See Gwyn, *Nationalism Without Walls*, p. 18. Gwyn’s exalted claims for Canadian exceptionalism in the matter of the state forming the people are not in line with most modern scholarship on nationalism.

25 See Carens, ed., *Is Quebec Nationalism Just?* for a remarkable treatment of the ethics of Québec nationalism which quite simply equates “liberal principles” with “principles of justice”. Unhelpful as a guide to the Québec issue, the volume is a very eloquent witness to the hegemony of liberalism among Canadian academics.

26 Of course, with Québec’s accession to independence, the future of the former Canada would be open to strategies of political and cultural mobilization that will attempt, against high odds, to find a new pattern in the shards and remnants of the old framework. Here again the Russian example may teach us much about the difficulties and promise of the years ahead.

northern North America; it was not fundamentally about an ethnic or linguistic compact, a tradition of tolerance, any notion of popular sovereignty, the equality of men and women, or the founding of a “democracy”. It was, to coin a phrase, about the formation of a “Dominion”, a liberal territory secured, ultimately, by force of British arms.

All the literature of the Crisis which reads back into “Canada’s” 19th-century origins a blueprint of the contemporary welfare state²⁷ or of a warmhearted bilingual, bi-national, democratic compact of peoples is romanticizing the past. It incapacitates us in our efforts to think through the present. These books characteristically miss the extent to which the institutions and identities of Victorian “Canadians” were first and foremost those of Britain. The *process* of Canada underwent a significant if partial popular revolution in the 1940s, characterized inter alia by the invention of Canadian citizenship, and it is from the middle decades of the 20th century that most of what we now take for granted about “Canada” — its bilingualism, its flag, its democracy, its limited social egalitarianism — was constructed. From this perspective, “Canada” is short-hand for a complex process through which a British liberal empire was partially transformed into a democratic nation-state: Canada refers to a “moment” rather than an “object”. And against essentialist nationalisms, a lapsed Canadian notes the relative *discontinuity* of Canadian history, the *recency* of Canada (although of course not of all of the elements incorporated by or influenced by the process).²⁸

Both “Canada” and “Québec” as integral national projects emerged in a post-colonial setting; our present crisis is thus a distant echo, in this sense, of the collapse five decades ago of the British Empire. Both “Canada” and “Québec” as projects seek to mobilize concepts of sovereignty and citizenship in a northern North America vacated by an active and effective imperial presence. While conceding the significance of the construction of “ethnicity” as an active and significant process, we should find much in this competitive process of liberal national state-formation that

27 The most outlandish attempt to read back into the old dominion the “social welfare” sensibilities of the 20th century can be found in Saul’s *Reflections of a Siamese Twin*, which attempts to link good old Dr. Baldwin, dispensing free medicine to the Toronto poor in 1832, to Monique Bégin defending the public health system in 1996 (p. 497). There’s a lot of static on the supposed “direct line” between pre-Victorian philanthropy and post-Keynesian welfarism.

28 The clearest expression of this theme in the literature under review is found in Citizen X, *Who Are the People of Canada Anyway?*: “I think that many of us in the rest of the country [outside Québec]...are now (rightly enough) embarrassed by a great deal of what we see as our quite slender past, and we have tried to forget it. In the process, we have haphazardly fallen into the sloppy habit of *pretending that Canada has for a long time been something that it has only quite recently started to become*. In fact, the obvious great event of the 1960s that finally precipitated the not-so-long march to our current impossible confusion was the start of the almost final phases in the global decline and fall of the British empire — an event which had begun in earnest between the two world wars.... The great dismantling of the old ‘Empire and Commonwealth’ in the 1960s is where the troubles of Canada and Quebec in the 1990s really begin.... Put another way again, the Canada that began on July 1, 1867, as the first modern political expression of the geographic unity which had arisen during the previous three centuries, was (as the founder of what now calls itself ‘Canada’s national newspaper’ took pains to stress many years ago now) ‘*not a nation*’. It was just the first self-governing dominion of the British empire” (p. 59, emphasis in original). Apart from quibbling with Citizen X about whether or not Canada can be considered a self-governing dominion in 1867, one finds his realism refreshing. No wonder he publishes under a pseudonym.

cannot be reduced to a struggle between ethnic groups. And against postmodern cynicism, a more genuinely critical perspective affirms not only the possibility and necessity of accurate historical knowledge, which (at the limit) may mitigate the drive to violence that powers so much of the apocalyptic rhetoric of *Crisis*, but also argues for the logical coherence, extending even to epistemological and ontological assumptions, of the governing discourses of British North America's and Canada's rulers from the mid-19th century to the 1970s.

This alternative perspective, in which both "Québec" and "Canada" emerge as 20th-century "new liberal" responses to the challenge of ordering a northern North America previously conceptualized and governed as a British liberal dominion, may seem, and in fact is, a rather obvious interpretation which closely adheres to the available evidence. Many writers have described something close to this.²⁹ Still, these ways of thinking have not yet been consistently or rigorously pursued, and doing so would open up some new conceptual and political space. If both "Canada" and "Québec" were political projects, related to but also distinct from the antecedent British liberal dominion, neither one can claim a simple historical or ethical priority over the other. Neither one can be accurately depicted as the "natural" nation to which the Other is suitably cast as conqueror, victim or seducer. Since neither one "came first", and since neither one is intrinsically a perverse or atavistic "nationalism" counterposed to the Enlightenment rationality of the other (to cite a rather overworked federalist trope), nor contrariwise a "fragile," "artificial" and "unnatural" construction counterposed to a more sturdily rooted and natural nation (to cite an equally hackneyed *nationaliste* theme), all the narratives which produce such limited and biased understandings can be seen afresh as simplistic attempts at political mobilization rather than as useful guides to the complexities of the past.

And, more radically, they should be set aside by anyone interested in thinking the *Crisis* without falling into dichotomies. This also applies to those many writings which now depict an "English Canada", supposedly the closet case that dared not speak its own name, now timidly whispering its identity and finding its "essential voice", which is (of course!) one which urges us to keep to the path of the "commonsensical middle way", that sane sensible voice of compromise and order which so many Canadian historians have idealized and reified as the essence of Canada itself.³⁰ One finds it paradoxical, however, that when this "English Canada"

29 A number of the authors under consideration actually believe that we are, in an important sense, "After Canada". They tend to be those who are outside the academy. Francis writes: "I think most of us are aware...that the unity debate is now mostly about housekeeping, the distribution of power. Like Humpty Dumpty, Canada is broken and will not be put back together again. After all the royal commissions, all the unity rallies, all the student exchanges, Canada is still not one country. If we ever believed it was, we cannot any longer" (*National Dreams*, pp. 109-10). Conlogue essentially concurs (*Impossible Nation*, p. 163), as does "Citizen X" (*Who Are the People of Canada Anyway?* pp. 22-3). Perhaps because of their professional identification, many Canadian academics have been slow to express agreement with this point of view. It seems for the moment to be flourishing outside the academy.

30 The "cult of compromise" — i.e., the notion that mutual tolerance, peace, moderation, etc. are all intrinsic to the Canadian essence — is widely celebrated in this literature. In some texts it is given a new polemical charge. Thus Réal Bélanger in Bothwell, ed., *Canada and Quebec*, ingeniously adapts the orthodox motif of compromise to the exigencies of the present-day struggle, in a way which places

comes out, it promptly assumes a stance of epistemological and ethical primacy over all others, to the point of describing (and denouncing) their “nationalism” while remaining discretely silent about its own.³¹ And of course one might question with equal severity the many texts that produce a unilinear continuous narrative, from the Conquest to Meech Lake, of “Québec’s” victimization — narratives which have apparently attained the status of hegemonic common sense within nationalist circles in francophone Québec, but which work only by rigorously excluding a huge realm of cultural and political phenomena — Cartier, Laurier, Tarte, St. Laurent, Trudeau to name only a few political figures — as somehow extraneous to (or betrayers of) the nation’s true essence.³² It may prove genuinely liberating to shelve these tropes of victimization, perversity and naturalness, and to regard both Canada and Québec as relatively recent, and eminently political, constructions, each as “natural” and as “unnatural”, as “tolerant” and as “intolerant”, as the other.

Historians in the former Canada, “Canadian”, “Québécois”, and those many whose analyses largely skirt the question of nation altogether,³³ barely register on the scale

the burden of blame for intolerance squarely on a reductively-defined “English Canada”: with regard to Manitoba schools, he remarks: “French Canada thought that English Canada could not understand the spirit of Confederation, because French Canada, French Catholic Canada, saw no place for itself in this new Canada — and, to me, French Canada was right in thinking like that. English Canada did not understand the spirit of Canada. Canada is a bicultural country, yet with the Manitoba Schools’ Question, English Canada abolished the kind of school that allowed French Catholic Canadians to be part of Canada” (p. 49). And on Laurier’s opposition to Regulation 17: “When Ernest Lapointe made an opposing motion [against the Regulation] in the House of Commons in 1916, Laurier supported him strongly. Laurier made a very important speech about language, the most important of his life. He tried to show that Canada is based on understanding, on tolerance. This is the spirit of Confederation, the spirit that French Canada understood from the beginning and that English Canada refused to understand” (p. 56). But, logically, if (as is generally argued by *nationalistes*) the English Canadians, by virtue of the Conquest, dominated Confederation, how could it have been the case that they “misunderstood” the very regime they had brought into being and over which they exercised hegemony? How could this “spirit of tolerance” have been in fact the “spirit of Confederation”, if it was in fact unrecognized by the majority? What is missing in this overly ethnicized narrative is the power of what was in fact the unifying ideology which made Confederation possible — i.e., classical British liberalism — and the complexities that all questions of church and state posed for liberals and Liberals, Laurier and many other francophone liberals not least among them.

- 31 The classic texts here are the many belligerent essays in *‘English Canada’ Speaks Out*, which reminded one, inadvertently, of the sterling virtues of silence.
- 32 To be fair, the sovereigntist Binette would allow a statue to be erected to Trudeau in the new sovereign Québec, since he holds that his mishandling of Canadian politics allowed for the growth of the independence movement. However, he is careful to stipulate, following no doubt the model of the sign laws already in force, that Trudeau’s statue be shorter than that of René Lévesque (*Indépendance et liberté*, p. 104). McRoberts seems to associate St. Laurent’s deviation from the French-Canadian “essence” with his “mixed” ethnic parentage and with his bilingual, bicultural status (*Miscegenating Canada*, p. 26).
- 33 That is, those whose social histories re-enact in a relatively inert and analytically absent Canada the universal triangulation of class, ethnicity-race and gender. The tendency to blame such social historians for the decline of the Canadian myth-symbol complex obscures the absence of any powerful new interpretation from mainstream political history itself. What we require from Canadian and Québec historians are analyses of power, national myth-symbol complexes, hegemony, moral regulation, and liberalism — i.e., not a “social history” without politics, nor more conventional atheoretical “political history” without social and cultural grounding, but rather a cultural and social history of Canadian and Québec power relations over time and in relation to each other.

measuring the seismic disturbances of this Crisis. They have produced not one significant work which explores its dynamics.³⁴ Instead they have merely repeated the fine old narratives of yesteryear, blissfully unaware, it would seem, that narrating the history of Canada as a continuous and successful national experiment, while an attractive option if one is addressing a public school assembly or constructing a beer commercial, is not the most promising way to explore (and to survive) a myth-symbol complex in deep crisis. The burden of “explaining” the Crisis has generally fallen on the shoulders of political scientists, sociologists and constitutional lawyers, for most of whom even the 1980s are “ancient history”. Even historians writing in these social-science-oriented volumes tend to become present-minded.³⁵ A realist school of Canadian history, if one can imagine such a thing, could make a real difference in this situation, by continually interrupting the steady flow of nationalist stories. Paradoxically, a hard-boiled, unsentimental and neo-Marxist approach, which refuses to privilege either Canada or Québec as political projects, and which never forgets the costs of the liberal project for subaltern classes and groups, could rescue this debate from its tendentious essentialism and violence. But one should not forget the small detail that there is at present no discursive space for the development of any such non-nationalist perspective. Almost everyone who writes or speaks on this question has become an “official nationalist” of one description or another. It is, apparently, the price of admission to the debate.

The relative absence of theoretically-informed historians has not deterred all and sundry from invoking the authority of the past. “History” obligingly justifies the most surprising things in this discussion. Political polemics unceasingly urge us to sign up as bit players in grand narratives, as gripping and violent as the latest Hollywood epics. The crisis infantilizes its participants and simplifies historical understanding; often it gives us a comic-book world, with villains and heroes, “progress” and “decline”, and above all, operatic dramas of betrayal or faithful love. Canadian history is grasped in charming vignettes — John Ralston Saul’s preposterously overworked “golden handshake” of Lafontaine and Baldwin, a classic example of the nationalist uses of the “reassurance of fratricide”,³⁶ the reconceptualization of John A.

34 The best attempt to do so is Bothwell, *Canada and Quebec*, but, useful as it is, this text based on oral interviews is very much a compendium of various historical opinions and does not really attempt to explain the crisis it documents.

35 See, for instance, this comment from Viv Nelles’s otherwise very discerning discussion in “Ontario ‘Carries On’” in McRoberts, *Beyond Quebec*, p. 42, with regard to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms: “It has proved to be too useful to too many people to be dumped in a huff. Indeed, too much effort is being spent attempting to establish more rights, than to return to a world of no rights at all”. In what period of northern North American history would one find a regime in which the average person enjoyed no rights at all? Isn’t the (already deified) Charter being asked to bear more mythic weight in this passage than it can realistically be asked to bear? Or notice this comment, à propos of Clark and Mulroney, in Susan Delacourt’s popular account of the failure of the Charlottetown Accord, *United We Fall*: “Look...at their approach to politics in the 1990s — the real point of departure between Quebec’s attitudes and attitudes in English Canada” (p. 42). Before the 1990s, presumably, all was sweetness and light.

36 See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, pp. 200-1. Drawing on the example of the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacres in France, which would be later “remembered” as having taken place within the family of the French, among a cozily reimagined “French people”, rather than among murderously

Macdonald as an ardent democrat,³⁷ Mulroney or Trudeau as the Great Men who betrayed the Canadian (or conversely the Québec) dream.³⁸ We are asked to forget about 20th-century social science, philosophy and critical theory, and enter the hero-and-villain frameworks of a time before relativity, historical materialism, cultural theories of nationalism, the linguistic turn. Even Social Darwinism escapes from its historical demise and in this literature enjoys a moment of rejuvenation — which would be a charming anachronism for the cultural historian, were he or she not reminded of the rather dismal political outcomes often associated with such deterministic evolutionary metaphors.³⁹

Most “traditional political historians”, some of whom are notoriously apt to blame “social historians” for the dismemberment of the national narrative, have simply added their cultural authority to one or other of the powerful nationalisms. This is not surprising. In most nationalist projects, from “Canada” to “Bosnia”, it falls to conventional bourgeois historians to describe the necessity and goodness of the nation, that transcendental project in which one is asked to invest one’s life. Coated decorously with footnotes, hedged about with evasions, staunchly empiricist in epistemology, conveyed with the aloof disparagement and sly patronage that are the average ironic Canadian intellectual’s stock-in-trade, much of the literature on the Crisis is so sure in its certainty that it itself underwrites violence against the imagined Other. One reads over and over again, either explicitly or between the lines: “*They must be crazy...*” Canadian and Québec historians have become experts in describing the weirdness, atavism, oppressiveness and datedness of all nationalisms — except, of course, their own.

antagonistic Protestants and Catholics, Anderson suggests that nationalism characteristically and paradoxically develops an interest in remembering such conflicts, which are reassuringly remembered as family squabbles. By elevating the “handshake” of Lafontaine and Baldwin to mythic status, Saul attempts to do the same thing with the bitter conflicts which divided Catholics and Protestants, French-speakers and English-speakers in 19th-century Canada. It is suggestive that only a tiny percentage of Canadians would be able to identify the personages in question.

37 Powe, *A Canada of Light*, p. 17.

38 The way in which Trudeau is made personally responsible for much of the crisis — particularly in *Misconceiving Canada* by McRoberts, who is an ardent apologist for both Bi-and-Bi dualism and for Meech — obscures the far more interesting question of the necessary social and cultural preconditions for the success of Trudeauvian liberalism across Canada. An intensive re-examination of Trudeau’s *Federalism and the French Canadians* (1968) might enable us to come to a much more complex and interesting verdict than the clichéd interpretation which stresses his anti-nationalism (to begin with, his emphasis on Québec as the principal homeland of the French-Canadian nation hardly corresponds to the conventional emphasis on his anti-nationalist individualism). As for Mulroney, he has become a folk-devil in popular literature on the crisis, most lamentably in Newman’s *The Canadian Revolution*, in which he is not accidentally transformed into a “habitant” (p. xvi). Even in the poisoned context of this discussion, Pierre Fournier’s attempt in *A Meech Lake Post Mortem* to draw a parallel between Trudeau’s plans for the Canadian federation and Hitler’s thousand-year-Reich (p. 37) is a little over the top — and this in a book published by an academic press!

39 There is some delicious Social Darwinistic rhetoric in Binette, for whom Canada is merely a weak entity which has failed to measure up to the test of natural selection (*Indépendance et liberté*, pp. 93, 174). More poetic, but no less determinist, is Lucien Bouchard’s metaphor, introduced at the first annual convention of the BQ in Montreal: sovereignty is “like the ripening of a fruit, like reaching adulthood, like the opening of a river into the ocean” (cited in Newman, *The Canadian Revolution*, p. 406).

Can we do otherwise? The darkness gathers, and the bonfires give their comfort. Chanting our war cries, in these diminished and diminishing circles of light, at least we find ourselves among our own kind (or so we may fondly imagine). In the former Canada, as in the former Yugoslavia (although of course much more was at stake in the latter, such as the noble if unsuccessful dream of workers' self-management) to be confused, or — worse — a hybrid, is potentially dangerous. Many intellectuals who once identified, however critically, with the Enlightenment political project, find safety and solace in deconstructing their former positions and renouncing a possible politics altogether.

If one could do otherwise, what would a critical historian's agenda be? First, a ruthless criticism of all the historical narratives which so powerfully structure public debate — that is, a campaign, armed with as much critical and social theory as is necessary, to confront their simplicity with a more complex and analytical historical understanding. This should not just take the form of the historians' favourite game of pedantry — although the crop of simple factual errors in so many of these books suggests the need for publishers to hire some fact-checkers and writers to read some history.⁴⁰ No, it should also take the form of a critique of the plausible but extremely partial accounts of the Crisis in which one individual, one group, one event is treated

- 40 One savours these passages from B. W. Powe, *A Canada of Light* — a metaphysical and rapturous account of a Canada “without walls”, which carries the imprimatur of Trudeau himself:

“Remember:

The Confederation debates of 1864-1867.

Representatives from Canada West (Ontario), Canada East (Quebec), and the Maritimes, gathered in Charlottetown, Quebec City, and what was soon to be renamed Ottawa. They met and talked, and talked; and talked on, through the days, into the evenings” (p. 17)....

“The pattern:

One communication story outlines the shape of civility, of tact and trust, of a recognition of the other (of difference, a necessary strangeness), and of an unusual partnership formed in a loose, mostly peaceable confederation. This is the story-line that emerges when we look at how the Fathers of Confederation gathered and welcomed debate on nation-building. That process stressed the lack of definition, the improvisational nature, of the agreement they called, with careful understatement, the BNA Act” (p. 33).

I confess I have difficulty in “remembering” this pattern. I had forgotten the distinctly separate representatives sent from the separate colonies of Canada East and Canada West. That the ultimate Confederation Conference took place in Bytown was news to me. I would have “remembered” that it happened in London. That Britain played no significant role in this process worth mentioning is, for me, an eye-opener, as is word of the democratic enthusiasm of the Fathers of Confederation for a civil, wide-ranging, “inclusive” debate; indeed, I would have been as inclined to emphasize the Fathers' mutual suspicion and hard bargaining, behind closed doors, over such issues as minority religious rights. I now eagerly await word, in this new revisionist history-as-imagined-by-poetic-postmodernism, of the popular referendum which our tolerant and surprisingly democratic ancestors organized on the Confederation question, and of Nova Scotia's warm approval of the project. Powe's book merits serious and sustained critique as an illustration of the potentially smooth transition from the “classical liberalism” of 19th-century Canada to a postmodern cybernetic mysticism. “Gloriously poetic — read aloud to anyone you love”, says the *Victoria Sun* of this book. Sound advice: a lover enchanted by this book might be amenable to any number of improbable but enticing possibilities.

Powe's ability to “forget” the imperial connection, and the reasons why the BNA Act was named the BNA Act, is far from atypical of Canadian nationalist writing in this time of crisis. John Ralston Saul spends a great deal of time avoiding the fact of the Dominion's *imperial* status and neglects the extremely ambiguous relationship established between the new democracy in the 1940s

as primary. It should include critical analysis of the higher romanticism which, in sentimentalizing the Canadian project, obscures the power relations and cultural hegemony which were its conditions of possibility and which also account for its contemporary crisis. The stories we tell in this context are not harmless, and many of the most popular and respected narratives of the Crisis are brutally simplistic, reductionist, dangerous and stupid.

Second, we should embark on an extended examination of the history of “sovereignty” as a concept in northern North America.⁴¹ In a few years, after all, we may well be firing at each other over questions of “sovereignty”, and this exercise might be a bit more interesting if we first know what the concept really means. This should not be allowed to become an effort monopolized by philosophers or critical theorists, helpful as they might be in other contexts. Rather, we want to know how the discourse of sovereignty has functioned historically in Canada. Just when did “Ottawa” become the “sovereign” government (if in fact it ever did)? How have other sovereignties within Canada been conceptualized? What was the “common-sense” understanding of Canadian sovereignty in, say, the 1890s or the 1960s? How did the liberal project of British North America articulate the concept of sovereignty? Was Confederation in fact *generally* seen as an exercise in sovereignty-association?

Third, we need to work on what was continuous and discontinuous in northern North American history. This would entail an exploration of what Confederation did or did not mean; that is, the extent to which its conventional placement as the birthday of the liberal and bi-national democratic state of Canada is accurate in anything more than a conventional sense.⁴² This would also entail an exploration of the “second moment” of Canada, that post-imperial attempt at constructing a new democracy in the postwar period, which was in an important sense a project of the social democratic

and its colonial antecedents. He goes so far as to condemn as colonialist those historians who emphasize the British tie. An alternative approach, i.e. a description of “Canada” in less ethnic and essentialist terms, in which it is metaphorically construed as a project rather than as an organism, might place emphasis on the liberal preconditions — about property, progress, the rights of the individual, the benefits of a British and balanced constitution, and so on — of the “long confederation” (1841-1896) through which a liberal dominion, attractive to many francophones and anglophones, attained quasi-state status in the 19th century.

41 An important point of departure here is Jens Bartelson, *A Genealogy of Sovereignty* (Cambridge, 1995). So far as I am aware, there is no comprehensive study of the uses of “sovereignty” in the Canadian context, although the first five chapters of Russell, *Constitutional Odyssey*, constitute an excellent introduction to the problem.

42 Such an exploration would build on the important work of A. I. Silver, who shows that Confederation in Québec was constructed as an early move towards sovereignty-association; see his succinct discussion in Bothwell (p. 38) and his extended treatment of the theme in *The French-Canadian Idea of Confederation 1864-1900* (Toronto, 1982). And although he adamantly refuses any attempt to find in his monograph any message for modern times, Ged Martin in *Britain and the Origins of Canadian Confederation* (1995) proposes a revisionist reading of the history of Confederation rich with troubling implications for those who still wish to see 1867 as the “birth of a nation”. Note the thoughtful discussion of Philip Resnick in *Thinking English Canada*: “As long as we operate under the assumption, as a majority of English Canadians does, that there is a single Canadian nation formed in 1867 of which Québécois and aboriginal peoples are a constituent part, there is relatively little room for discussion. We are involved in a zero-sum game in which the very survival of the political unit, Canada, whose citizenship we espouse, seems threatened by any concessions on the subject of nationhood” (p. 7).

left, driven in part by a concept of people's sovereignty that emerged from the Second World War and its massive social disturbances. It would also entail an exploration of how Quebec, that similarly post-imperial and increasingly social democratic project of the 1950s-1970s, also confronted a revaluation of popular sovereignty. So far, this reconceptualization only places in a more critical light developments which are already well known. But what could be more strikingly original would be the exploration of the extent to which the two national projects, seemingly antithetical, also drew powerfully on each others' energies, myths and symbols; for one of the most complicated and fascinating parts of the Crisis is the extent to which the two great nationalisms have been constructed against, but also in collaboration with, each other — they have rarely been "two solitudes" in reality. They have been more like two software programs for political integration, running paradoxically (and problematically) within the same system and generating its characteristic "system errors".

Fourth, we need to critique the role of "marginal peoples" in the Crisis of Canada — all those subaltern identities that the two major nationalisms either shove to one side or opportunistically exploit.⁴³ It would be a question of exploring the contemporary usages of the Amerindian question, not only the attempts to assimilate it to the existent narratives of nation-formation and to incorporate Amerindian groups into ahistorical models of the "nation", but also the attempts to "play the Amerindian card", in the apparently unceasing attempts to show the moral inferiority of the other nationalism.⁴⁴ It would also entail an analysis of the symbolic role of the Atlantic and

43 An important aspect of this critical work would be to deconstruct the attempt to link the communitarian critique of liberalism with the *nationaliste* critique of Confederation — a binary opposition which attributes solidarity and community to Québec, competitiveness and individualism to "English Canada". For a critique of treatments of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms which take this dualist tack, see Thomas Berger, "Quebec's Rendezvous with Independence", in Granatstein and McNaught, eds., *'English Canada' Speaks Out*, p. 317. It is unfortunate that Ray Conlogue, who has written an important and interesting book on Québec from a refreshingly sympathetic perspective, should have so completely yielded to such a tidy dualism in such passages as this: "Quebec is a traditional society which took root before the ideas of the Enlightenment swept through Europe. English Canada, on the other hand, was founded much later by people who were marked by the doctrine of individualism and mistrustful of collective identity" (p. 15). How are these collective identities defined here? Were English-speaking inhabitants of the territory that became Canada in fact on the ground "much later"? In Newfoundland? Nova Scotia? Were, say, the Highland Scots or the Irish Catholics generally mistrustful of their own collective identities? In a book that usefully questions stereotypes about Québec, Conlogue seems unable to resist stereotyping Québec's English-speaking "Other".

44 Not all the contestants play the Amerindian card the same way. Some rely on a traditional 19th-century rhetoric of patronage and dismissal. For Bercuson and Cooper, Amerindian resistance at Oka was simply "criminal behaviour" (*Deconfederation*, p. 29); and Bourgault, ironically enough on their same wave-length, writes of the "Savages" and of the "Last of the Mohicans", a.k.a. Elijah Harper, who demolished the Meech Lake Accord "with a slash of his tomahawk" (*Now or Never*, pp. 36-37). For the most part, the rival nationalists all claim to have treated aboriginal peoples better than did people on the other side; Canadian nationalists also emphasize the evident contradiction of denying to the Cree of northern Québec the same right to self-determination claimed by francophone Québécois. It is symptomatic of the shallowness and irresponsibility of this tit-for-tat public debate that so little thought has been given to the potential for various kinds of sovereignty in both the former Canada and Québec, perhaps involving co-responsibility of the respective new states for constructing a safe and autonomous space for subjugated native peoples. For a critical discussion of the evolution of the "three nations" position on the left, see Simpson, *Faultlines*, pp. 53-56.

other regions. Generally constructed in this literature as a basket-case, hopelessly dependent on Ottawa, the East's own distinctive "Atlantic Revolution" and the neo-nationalist energies marshalled by liberal province-building should be seen as important elements in the transformation of the liberal dominion into a new democracy.⁴⁵ So, too, should the ambiguity of the West's role, as both communitarian critic and last bastion of neo-liberal verities. Indeed, kicking the habit of simple-minded dualism would help us gain new insights into the complex inner workings of the rival national projects themselves.⁴⁶ It will also help us recall, at a moment of danger, the memory of class solidarity and united people's struggle that, in the working-class movement and on the left, have shone out as moments of genuine possibility and understanding, and which, in holding up a "real ideal" of an unrealized new social order, have given progressives within both national projects grounds upon which they can struggle together. A generally untheorized practice of sovereignty-association, imperfectly developed but not powerless, can already be traced within the working-class movement and the intellectual community.

Fifth, we need to step back from the lush melodrama of apocalypse that sweeps through this literature of crisis, threatening readers with fragmentation, collapse, impoverishment and dismemberment. One could write a book on the rhetoric of breakage through which a generation of irresponsible intellectuals has sought to instill panic responses in the Canadian and Québec publics.⁴⁷ Nothing is more cherished by many of these intellectuals of the Crisis than projections, the more economic and

45 As Charles Taylor so reductively puts it, "What underdevelopment is to the Atlantic provinces, what being a one-crop economy used to mean to the Prairies, being the only French-majority society in this hemisphere is to Quebec" (*Reconciling the Solitudes*, p. 37). Besides the gratuitous insult to the cultural and political achievements of the people of the Atlantic region, where so much "social liberalism" and "welfare state" thought originated, and which is presently the homeland of Taylor's beloved NDP, one might note the blithe philosophical assurance with which Taylor obliterates the existence of the French-speaking islands of the West Indies (not to mention his implicit downgrading, not unusual for a Quebecker, of the Acadian identity). And from Philip Resnick, *Thinking English Canada*, p. 84, we learn of the stolid "conservatism" of the Atlantic provinces (which suggests that his "thinking" of English Canada is not as unconventional as it believes itself to be).

46 A post-nationalist framework of analysis could, for example, illuminate the complex ways in which the two national projects have borrowed from and influenced each other, and perhaps also illuminate the extent to which the crisis itself, insofar as it serves to "unify" either camp, is rather functional for the ruling classes. Jean Morisset, *L'Identité usurpée. I. L'Amérique écartée* (Montréal, 1985) has some interesting things to say on this theme, albeit from a very conventional *nationaliste* perspective.

47 Peter C. Newman, *The Canadian Revolution*, is the veritable fount of apocalyptic rhetoric: of the Free Trade Agreement, he writes, "The deal...left the country vulnerable to the Darwinian ethic of unfettered competition, where survival of the fittest and the fastest was all that counted. Most significantly, it left Canada vulnerable to cultural genocide" (p. 111). Trudeau is depicted as follows: "Masked and huddled in his cloak, he mysteriously controlled the melodrama of Canadian politics..." (p. 327). Finally: "The status quo had fallen to its demise through the chasm that separated illusion from reality.... Experience had made it impossible to believe any longer in responsible politicians, pious priests, sensible Royals, trustworthy lawyers, peace-loving peacekeepers, reliable bankers, principled businessmen or honest diplomats. As they sank in the quicksand of 1980s greed, they dragged down with them much of the corresponding faith in politics, religion, monarchy, business or the law" (p. 469). But what, precisely, was overthrown in this supposed Canadian Revolution? What new classes or groups are now exercising hegemony? Where is the considered evidence for any of this? Jeremy Webber, among many others, solemnly announces that "In 1990 Canada entered the most serious crisis of its 123-year history" (p. 3) — more serious, presumably, than the period in

question-begging the better, which predict the dire (or beneficent) consequences of Québec's independence.⁴⁸ This frantically manic-depressive literature often oscillates between contented celebrations of the good burghers of Canada, those wise, middle-of-the-road Fathers of this happy land, and out-of-control explosions of rage against the strange, perverted aliens who have pulled their work into the dust. In this imaginary world of Crisis, it is always five minutes to midnight.

From an alternative perspective, however, neither complacency nor panic are justified. We live in the former Canada, and we are already dealing culturally and politically with the consequences of Québec's socio-psychological independence. Québec's independence is a matter of contemporary history, and in and of itself is unlikely either to liberate or enslave; rather, under conditions of peaceful coexistence in northern North America, and after a period of economic and social disequilibrium, Québec may well function as a prosperous liberal bourgeois democracy like scores of others on the planet.⁴⁹ It may even remain part of some over-arching political arrangement with the rest of Canada.

This is not the same as saying, however, that those conditions of peaceful coexistence will be easily attained, and that the rhetoric of apocalypse and ultra-nationalism indulged in on both sides, and by a disturbing number of well-paid and tenured intellectuals, has not created risks of a far worse outcome. The non-resolution of Amerindian issues, particularly, threatens any easy "bi-national" compromise, because in these issues ethnicity, nationality and territoriality are all fatally combined.⁵⁰ To deconstruct these rhetorics of violence and exclusion, to subject both national projects to the informed scrutiny of critical scholarship, would serve some

which the Dominion together with Britain stood virtually alone against the Nazis. For vintage catastrophic rhetoric on the *nationaliste* side, see Binette's comments on what would happen should Québec not vote for independence in its third referendum: "Si, cette fois-là, nous n'avons pas un sursaut de dignité, si nous ne franchissons pas une fois pour toutes, calmement, le seuil de la peur collective, le monde aura compris, même si nous refusons de l'admettre, que nous aurons choisi la voie de la lente disparition culturelle, le suicide en douce, l'auto-génocide" (*Indépendance et liberté*, p. 91). Such suicidal tendencies, however, are not restricted to Québécois: "L'exclusion du Québec de la réforme constitutionnelle canadienne de 1982 a été une erreur dévastatrice, qui n'a pu provenir que de l'aveuglement. Le Québec est le coeur politique et psychique du Canada. A l'échelle de l'histoire, le rejet du Québec est un acte suicidaire, qui déstabilise profondément et irrémédiablement le Canada" (*ibid.*, p. 93). How these two mentally unbalanced and putatively suicidal peoples are ever to enter into a mutually respectful and harmonious post-independence partnership remains something of a mystery.

48 For a fine critique of Fraser Institute economism on this question, see Marjorie Griffin Cohen, "The Meritocratic Society: Restructuring and the Future of Canada outside Quebec", in McRoberts, ed., *Beyond Quebec*, pp. 378-85. Lemco's *Turmoil in the Peaceable Kingdom* is perhaps the most balanced contribution to the literature predicting the economic consequences of independence. Such transitional costs might well be less severe than the traumatic impact of the neo-liberal assault on the welfare state in such provinces as Ontario.

49 For an excellent antidote to the lurid propaganda which attributes to Québec a monolithic authoritarianism and racism, see Sniderman et al., *The Clash of Rights*, pp. 80-155. This volume is in general a superb introduction to Canadian politics in the "era of rights" and a well-researched antidote to many clichés and stereotypes about the Canadian essence.

50 It is ominous that Binette, who is generally the voice of an "open" and multicultural nationalism of the PQ, explicitly discounts the possibility of self-determination for Amerindians on Québec soil — or at least, their right to secede (*Indépendance et liberté*, p. 51).

purpose if it worked to insulate at least some people from the rhetorical violence which, subtly or otherwise, insinuates itself into public rhetoric. After Canada, we need post-nationalist historians, who will forego the symbolic and monetary rewards of ultra-patriotism and punditry for the critical, even clinical re-examination of the preconditions and consequences of instituting political order in northern North America. Not for them the exquisite pleasures enjoyed by so many of the crisis intellectuals who have enjoyed rather more than their 15 minutes of postmodern fame, as they parade before the cameras as outraged westerners, zealous Québécois nationalists, “concerned Canadians”, all equally vituperative, shallow and futile. Rather, they will need to cut new paths in a strange world and venture beyond the comfort of campfires.

For, after all our words upon words upon words have fallen into silence, after our proud demonizations and our sacred moments, our brave if inevitably forlorn efforts to place a pattern on formlessness — after all our bold words and deeds, the darkness falls and our bonfires grow cold. Time to venture into the cleansing, cold, bright morning world beyond the dark, beyond the comforting and comfortable circles of the faithful, beyond the moment of Canada which, like it or not, has now come to an end. The time for mourning or celebration has passed. We must get on. As Margaret Conrad reminded us in 1992, “since nations as we know them are relatively recent historical phenomena, it is also very likely that they are also fleeting ones”.⁵¹ Or as Great Big Sea has more recently sung, “time brings all things to an end” — even this long-running crisis of Canada.

IAN MCKAY

51 Margaret Conrad, “The Politics of Place: Regionalism and Community in Atlantic Canada,” in McCrorie and MacDonald, eds., *The Constitutional Future of the Prairie and Atlantic Region*, p. 31.