

The Canadian Story

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The Canadian Story

CAN CANADA'S NATIONAL IDENTITY be defined through oral stories told by Aboriginals? Can it be found in the memoirs of a pioneer? In the recorded interviews of first-generation immigrants? In the personal histories of a society hooked on television and computers? Are the roots of our nationhood and citizenship embodied in the lives and stories, both oral and written, of ordinary people as they have been passed on from generation to generation and citizen to citizen? In short, are these stories the real source of our national identity?

Gerald Friesen's *Citizens and Nation: An Essay on History, Communication, and Canada* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2000) is the latest attempt by an historian to define Canada as a nation. His overall purpose is "to explain in new terms why 'Canada' is a meaningful public identity" (p. 227). He recognizes that the new history of recent years with its interest in specialized research and "limited identities" has been problematic in identifying overarching themes in the Canadian past, but Friesen also believes that the new cultural and social history can be very helpful in exploring the meaning of the Canadian story.

In this version of Canadian history, the narrators come from outside the academy. They are natives; they are women; they are immigrants; they are the average citizens of everyday society. Grandmother Andre told stories; Elizabeth Goudie wrote her memoirs in school scribbles; Phyllis Knight taped hours of interviews; and our contemporaries tell their stories to each other in all manner of forms, including the latest internet chatrooms. According to Friesen, Canada is a story of communication. Our continued interaction through changing forms of public conversation has given rise to our ability to speak of a Canadian nation in any meaningful way.

Close to the heart of his argument are the ideas of Harold Innis, who 50 years ago remarked that "Western civilization has been profoundly influenced by communication" and that "marked changes in communications have had important implications".¹ Friesen applies this insight to Canadian history by arguing that successive changes in communication technology have reconstructed ordinary citizens' perceptions of time and space and shaped their responses to such innovations. In his view, the success of Canada is a result of the success of ordinary Canadians in communicating to each other their histories, their concerns and their hopes for the future of the Canadian experiment. Out of these continuing conversations has come a common heritage that stretches from the earliest inhabitants to the beginning of the new millennium.

If Canada's most important legacy is its tradition of communication, this must be traced back through many overlapping social contexts, beginning with the oral and moving on to the written and printed word and the modern world of electronic communication. Each of these four stages is associated with a cultural and economic context that Friesen identifies in turn as "oral-traditional", "textual-settler", "print-capitalist" and "screen-capitalist". All through Canadian history, he argues, Canadians have struggled to master these changes and adapt them to their needs.

The spoken word carried great weight in traditional societies and also had a flexibility that is often precluded in a textual world. Survival and accomplishment in

1 Harold Innis, *The Bias of Communication* ([1951] Toronto, 1971), p. 3.

early societies depended on skills in listening, observing, sharing and relating to the natural world as a participant rather than as an adversary. This theme is embedded in the distinctive understandings of time and space in the culture of the aboriginal peoples who have lived in Canada for hundreds of generations. The vital role of land and nature in their way of life created an aboriginal perception of space and of its place in human life, and their vision of time encompassed both a present and a spiritual reality, allowing them to live simultaneously in both the past and the present. Aboriginal economies changed as the capitalist system has become global; but there is still a permanent legacy in culture and politics. Even today, in spite of all efforts to annihilate native culture and assimilate aboriginal peoples, the strength of tradition provides a lesson in history and citizenship as we continue to struggle with issues of our relationship with the environment.

Friesen depicts this world in the life of Grandmother Andre, a 93-year-old native woman who has spent her life in the fishing camps of the Canadian north and west. Much of his evidence comes from Graydon McCrea's documentary film, *Summer of the Loucheux: Portraits of a North American Indian Family* (1983). Grandmother Andre has passed her knowledge and ideas on to the generations that follow her – just as she had learned from those who went before. Her conceptions of time and space are defined mainly through the passing of legends and stories and the rhythms of the natural world. She thus represents the first link in the cultural connections joining the earliest peoples of the land to our own present.

The arrival of people of European descent opened a new stage in Canadian history. Although they differed in language, religion and origin, Friesen also argues that the new settlers had much in common with the indigenous people. They shared similar experiences of having family and household at the centre of their lives, and in the struggle for survival they faced similar hardships in balancing illness, hunger and insecurity with satisfaction, comfort and achievement.

This “textual-settler” society, as Friesen names it, straddled two worlds, and to illustrate this idea he uses the story of Elizabeth Goudie, a 20th-century Labrador woman of mixed aboriginal and European ancestry, who was a partner in the work of her trapper husband. She could read and write, and her life was shaped by cultural ideas and beliefs acquired through written texts from outside the world in which they lived and worked. Their life was defined by work for fur trade companies and by the cycles of boom and bust associated with the industrial revolution. They were also influenced by government policies, including programmes of government assistance, although they felt awkward about accepting what they saw as handouts. Such text-based relationships coexisted with more immediate oral ones. For Elizabeth, historical time focused on the Bible and stories from the Old Country, ecological time focused on the seasons, and structural time focused on life and death. Her vision of time was similar to the aboriginal one in that it was based on a relationship with the natural world and a multi-generational view of the past. She saw herself as a woman who belonged to her homeland of Labrador and whose hard work would prepare the way for a better future for her children. In these ways, her life illustrated Canadian themes that were common to both aboriginal and settler societies.²

Perceptions of time and space underwent a dramatic change as a result of the

2 For the life story of Elizabeth Goudie (1902-82), see the volume edited and introduced by David Zimmerly, *Elizabeth Goudie, Woman of Labrador* (Toronto, 1973).

transportation and communication revolutions of the 19th and 20th centuries. Moreover, the arrival of industrialism on a large scale meant that people now defined their lives in terms of work and wages rather than religion and place and nature. Work moved outside the home, with the wage system taking precedence over domestic production. As Canadians learned to go to school and read and write, the printed word became a new means of uniting Canadians, as it allowed for a shared national experience among Canadians, regardless of their location. In this period of “print-capitalist” society, one can begin to speak of the Canadian nation. Once individuals across the continent received similar information from newspapers and other print-based sources, they could reasonably think of themselves as relating to a common country. They could also participate in national political debates, although this itself was an area of conflict because the media was often in the hands of elites who decided what and how to present information. Also, immigrants (and francophones) often discovered that publications assumed that all national discussion was to take place in English.

As an illustration of the experience of Canadians in this era, Friesen follows the story of a German immigrant woman, Phyllis Knight, whose life story was recorded and published by her son. She and her husband Ali lived in poverty, often moving from one job to another, and enjoying little family life as they adapted their personal lives to the forces of the labour market. For Phyllis, however, a modern environment also included political discussions and reform movements. She lived long enough into the second half of the 20th century to see changes that achieved more power and freedom for the common people of both genders. Friesen argues that ordinary people such as Phyllis helped create new social and political programmes and institutions that redefined Canadian nationhood in the face of the dislocations of economic change. The industrial revolution shaped the modern Canada we know, but much of what we value about Canada today was a result of efforts to modify the unmitigated impact of economic forces on human life.³

But how does a nation, and Canada in particular, cope with globalization? Friesen sees Canadians striving to adjust to profound changes while at the same time holding onto values that are timeless. He finds that ongoing efforts at communication in families, workplaces and communities provide continuity between the worlds of oral tradition, text and print – and now the latest technologies of what he calls the “screen-capitalist” society. This a society where the dimensions of space and time have been altered by the technologies of radio and film, television and computers, cables and satellites. Perceptions of time are measured by the digital clock in an ever more invasive manner. The experience of space is divided into public and private spheres, and both are threatened by increased surveillance. People appear to live in more abundance, but there is a growing feeling of insecurity. Individuals are inundated with information, and the idea of a national identity seems to be more of a blur.

To represent the malaise of this new society, Friesen examines three individuals, including a middle-aged mother of four (Roseanne) whom he interviewed at length, a father of three (Frank) whose life is the subject of an interesting book by Ken Dryden

3 For the oral history prepared by her son, see Rolf Knight, *A Very Ordinary Life* (Vancouver, 1974).

and a prominent Quebec political activist, Simonne Monet-Chartrand, who has published her own life story.⁴ Roseanne represents the new role of government as a protector of citizens, for her personal success in joining the consumer society was made possible by the assistance of the state in providing her with education and training suited to her abilities. Frank's story illustrates the movement from the land or the factory to the computer screen; at work he seems to spend his day in futility, attempting to complete his assigned tasks while fully aware that the work will just keep coming. Meanwhile Simonne struggles with the idea of Quebec as a separate space, adopting first a trans-Canadian vision and then shifting to a vision of Quebec having different interests from other parts of Canada.

All of them seem to be wondering whether Canada, or any nation, can be "a viable governing unit" (p. 186), and this seems to be the reason why some historians have been calling for more attention to national history. As Canadians take advantage of more ideas and goods from outside the country (particularly in the form of information and entertainment from the United States), they also argue for strong protection of local cultures and social programmes that many of us consider to be central to the Canadian way of life. Friesen's conclusion is that Canadians need to come to terms with and adapt to these new forms of communication, just as they have done in the past, and make them serve the purposes of the community called Canada.

Citizens and Nation paints a broad picture, so the evidence is selective, depending to a large extent on the stories of the individuals he has chosen to illustrate his theme. The characters are easy to identify with, and they come alive within the pages of the book, although the selection may be too narrow for some readers. Perhaps as a westerner himself, Friesen has paid more attention to stories from the west and the north, and there is only Elizabeth Goudie of Labrador to represent the Atlantic Provinces. Readers will want to think about how his ideas apply in more detail to the history of their own region and communities. And to what extent could his arguments apply just as easily to the United States or other countries? Does he rely too much on our unique geography to make his argument? Is the conceptualization too international to be helpful in understanding the Canadian identity? The conclusion that Canadian society today should be cohesive and distinct due to the resourcefulness of its citizens in working out their common destiny remains to be proven. But perhaps that is one of the challenges the author is presenting to readers, who themselves are the citizens who must decide the future course of Canadian history.

This is an engaging and evocative book, written for the general reader as well as the academic. It is likely to become a staple in graduate seminars, but *Citizens and Nation* is also a must-read for all Canadians interested in the genesis and growth of their country as a nation. The significance of this book rests in its unique treatment of the Canadian identity, as it places the common people at the centre of the story and demonstrates the pivotal role they have played in shaping Canadian institutions and values. Friesen's version of Canadian history is not about grand and monumental acts, but about the people who managed to survive, provide for their families, engage with their communities and see the value of their own traditions. He looks to the least

4 Ken Dryden, *The Moved and the Shaken: The Story of One Man's Life* (Toronto, 1992); Simonne Monet-Chartrand, *Ma vie comme rivière: récit autobiographique*, 4 tomes (Montréal, 1981-92).

powerful, at least in conventional terms, for the clues to what makes Canada a nation. He finds the answer in the connective tissue of the communications that link the cyberworld of today to all the earlier peoples of our land.

There has been in Canada a long-running debate over the proper focus of Canadian history.⁵ Political historians have focused on nation-building and economic growth, while social historians have focused on conflicts and inequalities. Friesen criticizes older interpretations, but he also sees his work connected to earlier views by its concern for “the expression of identity, its interest in how ideas and aspirations are conveyed within large social groups, and its concentration on this particular place” (p. 7).

Friesen’s commitment to defining Canada is every bit as strong as that of other nation-building historians in the past; but his unorthodox approach is refreshing and may provide a way out of the impasse that has existed between the old and new guards of Canadian history. Friesen acknowledges the older signposts, but chooses a different route to get to the central questions of citizenship and nationhood. Just as he describes how aboriginal peoples mapped out canoe routes according to their ideas of what was important about space and time, Friesen has also used an understanding of the role of time and space in Canadian history to “map” the way to the heart of Canada. He leaves his readers with something to think about — their own time and place.

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5 See, most recently, J.L. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto, 1998), A.B. McKillop, “Who Killed Canadian History? A View from the Trenches”, *Canadian Historical Review*, 80, 2 (June 1999), pp. 269-99 and Bryan D. Palmer, “Of Silences and Trenches: A Dissident View of Granatstein’s Meaning”, *Canadian Historical Review*, 80, 4 (December 1999), pp. 676-86.