

The Racial Mosaic: A Pre-History of Canadian Multiculturalism, by D. R. Meister

Adesoji Babalola

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BOOK REVIEW: *The Racial Mosaic: A Pre-History of Canadian Multiculturalism*, by Meister, D. R. (2021). McGill- Queen's University Press.

Book Review Author:
Adesoji Babalola
Queen's University

In *The Racial Mosaic*, Daniel R. Meister critically explores how Canada's history and its notion of multiculturalism co-occurred with acute racism and constant settler colonial violence, despite immigration policies that welcomed immigrants of diverse heritages, cultures, and identities. Meister investigates the history of what he calls "philosophies of cultural pluralism" (4) and how such orientations are foundational to modern Canada's rhetoric of multiculturalism. To drive home his arguments, Meister discusses the social, political, cultural, and intellectual lives of three public figures in Canada—Watson Kirkconnell, Robert England, and John Murray Gibbon—whose voices, thoughts, and philosophies on multiculturalism were popular and bold during the late 1920s up to the second World War. Meister argues that despite their laudable campaigns for cultural inclusion with respect to immigrants' cultural diversity, the personal lives and beliefs of these influential figures showed that European whiteness was the only culture considered valuable enough to be included and embraced in Canada. In his words, "European cultures were the exclusive focus of "the Canadian Mosaic" (5).

The book is divided into five chapters, each centred on the deconstruction of the ideas and lives of these personalities in relation to racism and citizenship, including official policies of multiculturalism and cultural pluralism in Canada. In Chapter One, Meister examines Kirkconnell's biography, focusing on how Kirkconnell's intellectual development shaped his understanding of race in the long run. Kirkconnell was a Canadian scholar, university administrative executive, and national intellectual notable for his achievements in translation, anti-communism, and supporting the humanities. Meister explores how a culmination of exposure, learning, emotionality, sentiments, and bias shaped Kirkconnell's ideas about cultural pluralism, which were entrenched in scientific racism. Kirkconnell's multicultural ideologies stemmed from his strong scholarly ability to translate a variety of languages and literatures. He was known as an "apostle of peaceful understanding through his monumental translations from many poetic literatures – Icelandic, Hungarian, Polish, Ukrainian, French." (42). He not only promoted multiculturalism through literature, but also built a strong connection with European immigrants. However, as Meister points out, Kirkconnell's support for cultural pluralism in Canada "was limited to members of nominally white races and was marked by continued eugenic concerns" (33). Meister suggests that Kirkconnell's upbringing in Ontario, Canada, where he was predominantly surrounded by European families, may have contributed to the development of his racist understanding of multiculturalism. This environment may have limited his awareness of violence against Indigenous peoples and the theft of their unceded land, as well as the

mistreatment of Indigenous children in residential schools under his father's leadership. Kirkconnell's father, Thomas Allison Kirkconnell, was the headmaster of the Collegiate Institute in Lindsay, which was a residential school at that time.

The Ontario educational institutions Kirkconnell attended, including Queen's University, were also imperial, male-dominated, and predominantly white, and "engendered patriotism to the British Empire and a sense of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority" (37). Meister notes that Kirkconnell's upbringing and interest in genetics, eugenics, and the science of race further fuelled his belief in the superiority of whiteness and "the inferiority of non-Anglo-Saxon races" (41). In effect, Kirkconnell was silent about Canada's brutal colonial history and the imperial educational system because they were part of the racist cultural pluralism he advocated.

In Chapter Two, Meister explores the life and training of another intellectual—Robert England—who, like Kirkconnell, also articulated philosophies of cultural pluralism and immigration but with a focus on collective Canadian citizenship. This form of citizenship allowed immigrants in Canada to maintain crucial components of their cultural heritage and promoted unity in diversity, instead of subjecting immigrants to total assimilation. Yet, as an intellectual who managed a colonial institute, England believed in the binary classification of races into "whiteness" and "non-whiteness." He also supported the idea that biological race played a major role in cultural differences. Additionally, he viewed immigration as a capitalist venture whose purpose was to maximize profits for the Canadian state. Even though England's later writings accepted racial differences, his philosophies largely underscored assimilation and citizenship.

Meister contends that despite England's sympathy towards immigrants, he maintained the "belief that race determined cultural characteristics" (84). England's notion of cultural pluralism was one in which the country drew on and exploited the diverse racial characteristics of immigrants to optimize the country's potential. Meister suggests that England's training in interdisciplinary fields like sociology, developmental rurality, and psychology, which were laden with racism, and his influence on these disciplines led him to theorize and spread notions of "integration and assimilation" embedded in racism (84). For England, nation-building was crucial. This was related to the processes through which immigrants were not only assimilated into the Canadian community but also their access to the opportunities, rights, and benefits of Canadian citizenship. This approach to nation-building was important to sustain Canada's future and to promote population growth in the face of a dwindling reproduction rate. England centred assimilation during his stay as a teacher in Saskatchewan—a location with many Ukrainians at the time. England "believed that Ukrainians were at a less advanced stage of civilizational development than Anglo-Canadians" because they were non-Anglo-Saxon Europeans (92). This biased and racist belief suggests that England's idea of naturalization was largely assimilatory, discriminatory, and reductionist.

As Meister further explains, while England advocated for citizenship exams to demonstrate immigrants' strong understanding of the history and workings of various governments in Canada, he also advocated for a total stoppage of immigrants from non-English-speaking countries to allow time for non-English Canadians to comprehensively

assimilate. Despite England's education, his ideas were entangled in the bias and inaccuracy of race science (104).

Chapter Three pays critical attention to the ascension of John Murray Gibbon's ideology of cultural pluralism and his ideas surrounding immigration. Gibbon was a Scot who trained at Oxford and who became a public servant for the Canadian Pacific Railway, where he gained popularity for his award-winning 1938 book, *Canadian Mosaic: The Making of a Northern Nation*.

While Gibbon did not delve into race science like Kirkconnell and England, Meister shows how he too was preoccupied with the idea of portraying Anglo-Europeans as the central developers of other European societies. As Meister puts it, "Gibbon's philosophy of cultural pluralism, prior to and as expressed in his famous mosaic metaphor, was limited by racism" (128). Meister further argues that while Gibbon could not deny the existence of the racial Other in Canada, he neglected them in his philosophies and advocacy. Gibbon's colonial upbringing, working with the Royal Colonial Institute, travelling to settler colonial sites like Algeria and Canada, and his encounters with mixed races in these spaces must have influenced his perception of race: Meister considers Gibbon less racist than the other public intellectuals discussed in the book.

Meister, however, argues that this is not because Gibbon did not believe in a racial imbalance between whites and non-whites, but because of how Gibbon unsettled the hierarchy among European races and advocated for "unity in diversity" in Canada (143). Gibbon's embrace of all European nationalities, and especially of the Scots, was greatly influenced by literature, and as a result, "within four years of his arrival in Canada, he saw the country's racial diversity as a potential source of inspiration for a distinctive national literature" (143). While Gibbon's belief in cultural pluralism and his proposed immigration policies were assimilatory in nature, they allowed immigrants to retain some aspects of their cultural heritage. This was a milestone compared to Kirkconnell's and England's philosophies of assimilation. Meister argues that while Gibbon expressed anti-Semitic views in his early works, he later started to advocate for Jewish communities in Montreal. Additionally, he incorporated Indigenous elements into many of the festivals he organized in Quebec. Still, Gibbon's representations, philosophies, and writings about Canadian cultural diversity, as well as his popular garden and mosaic metaphors, largely centred on Europeans to the exclusion of non-white nationalities, including Indigenous peoples.

In Chapter Four, Meister investigates the roles of Robert England's *Ventures in Citizenship* and John Murray Gibbon's *The Canadian Mosaic*—two Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) radio programs on air in 1938 that Meister says helped popularize philosophies of cultural pluralism and triggered more state interest in the ideology. By 1938, individuals and state establishments began promoting unity, diversity, and tolerance because of the focus of England's book and these CBC programs exploring multiculturalism. These radio programs contributed to the discussion, emphasizing the importance of race in discussions about cultural pluralism, assimilation, immigration, and citizenship. While the programs gave official attention to the issue of cultural pluralism in Canada, ironically, this official interest replicated the racism embedded in the foundational philosophies of multiculturalism in the country. For example, while Gibbon was involved in writing and reading scripts on multiculturalism for some of the CBC programs at that time, Meister

notes that Gibbon was relieved of these positions because his accent was considered “too Scotch,” and was later replaced by an expert with a better Canadian accent (172). This demonstrated subtle discrimination and racism. As a result, in Meister’s words, the official idea of Canada’s inclusivity “also sanctioned and continued the existing racial exclusions of public intellectuals upon whom they relied” (171). By implication, Canada’s advocacy for inclusion and diversity remained mere rhetoric because of the racist structure and ideology upon which the country is built.

In Chapter Five, Meister discusses Canada’s efforts to promote cultural pluralism during the Second World War. He argues that official efforts to promote national cohesion were restricted by racial division. Meister thus suggests that Canada’s cultural pluralism during wartime “was limited to people of European descent and was fraught with anxiety about particular ‘racial’ and religious groups” (195). In effect, since European minorities were not considered a priority by the Canadian government, Canada failed to achieve national cohesion or to realize their goal of unity in diversity. For instance, during the Second World War, Meister notes that the Canadian government was not fully interested in protecting Canadian Europeans who were non-English and non-French. The chapter thus emphasizes how the racist beliefs of the three public figures persisted and were perpetuated both during and after the war. For example, during the war, William Lyon Mackenzie King was Prime Minister. As Meister points out, “King’s political career had been built in part on Anglo-Canadian racism, especially one event during his time as a deputy minister in the Department of Labour: the Vancouver Riots” (196). This riot occurred in September 1907, and was the culmination of the anger and racism of Anglo-Canadians in the city and their hatred of rapid Asian immigration to Canada. About ten thousand of Vancouver’s Anglo-Canadian residents went on rampage to assault people of Asian heritage and tried to wreck their businesses. Meister also explains how efforts to combat the racism of Nazis during the war in Canada were paradoxically influenced by internal racist ideas related to cultural diversity. While Canada was trying to fight the racism of Nazis externally, other forms of racism—such as anti-Asian, anti-non-Anglo Saxon, anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racisms—were also negatively engulfing the country. Consequently, “groups racialized as non-white were written off as demographically negligible and no attempt was made to recognize their loyalty or contributions to the war effort” (232).

In conclusion, *The Racial Mosaic* is a compelling book, illuminating our understanding of the racist and assimilatory foundations of Canada’s ideologies of cultural pluralism and the importance of unsettling the colonial logics of racism in modern Canada through collective praxis and transformative imaginations. However, it centres and dwells on the racialization of European minorities (non-Anglo-Saxon), but gives little attention to how Black and Indigenous peoples were marginalized and racialized by Canada’s rhetoric and performance of multiculturalism. Focusing more on the racialization of Black and Indigenous cultures in Canada’s history of multiculturalism would have given this book a more balanced critique of Canada’s racist multicultural foundations. As it stands, the book is largely about white people racializing other white people.