CANADIANIZING THE MYTH OF THE WEST

ABSTRACT

Despite the similarities between the unfolding histories of the U.S. Northern Plains and the Canadian Prairies during the last three decades of the 19th century, distinct, fundamentally different national identities were formed by 1905. John Herd Thompson argues that both identities were predicated on a western myth and shaped their future direction.

The creation of the provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta one hundred years ago symbolized the end of the incorporation of the West into the Dominion of Canada. Historians debate the cost effectiveness of the "National Policy" of the tariff, the transcontinental railway, and of agricultural settlement, but none doubt that between 1869 and 1905 the West became economically and politically Canadian. This successful integration took place notwithstanding the fact that Canada built its West on institutions copied almost to the letter from the United States. The Dominion Lands Act of 1872 and the Canadian Pacific Railway Act of 1881 essentially duplicated the Homestead Act and the Pacific Railway Bill passed by the U.S. Congress in 1862. The protective tariff, introduced in 1879 to encourage Eastern Canadian industry, exactly replicated U.S. protectionism; the homesteaders who settled Manitoba and the North-West Territories condemned the Canadian tariff just as their counterparts who migrated to the Dakotas and Montana attacked the original American version. In most respects, the unfolding histories of the U.S. Northern Plains and the Canadian Prairies during the last three decades of the 19th Century were remarkably similar – depressingly similar. Both regions were drawn into the web of industrial capitalism, and the Native peoples who had once been central were forced to the margins, whether on "reserves" or "reservations." The United States Congress allowed the white settlers of the Dakota and Montana Territories a greater local voice in government than the Canadian Parliament allowed the settlers of the North-West Territories, and the three states of North and South Dakota and Montana were admitted to the Union in 1889, sixteen years before Saskatchewan and Alberta entered Confederation as provinces.

Yet despite the many obvious similarities in their histories, by 1905 the people of the infant Prairie Provinces and their neighbors in the adolescent Northern Plains States articulated fundamentally different national identities. That difference astounded an English travel writer who visited a century ago. John Foster Fraser assumed that the tobacco-chewing Alberta farmer whom he met standing beneath an advertisement for "The Beer That Made Milwaukee Famous" would be an American immigrant. Instead Foster Fraser found him to be a passionate Canadian whose "dislike of the United States almost equaled his loyalty to the [British] Empire."[1] An abundance of similar evidence suggests that, between the 1870s and 1905, the international boundary drawn across the northern plains had become an ideological line in peoples' minds, not just a mark on a map. "The forty-ninth parallel ran directly through my childhood," remembered historian and novelist Wallace Stegner, born in Montana in 1909, and raised in Saskatchewan after 1913. But more than sixty years before Stegner designated the boundary as "the Medicine Line" in his book *Wolf Willow,* the forty-ninth parallel had been engraved into Canadian consciousness by the construction of an explicitly Canadian variant of the Western myth.[2]

"Myth" in this sense is not an antonym for fact, or a contrast to "history." As Richard Slotkin uses the concept in his book *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America,* myths are "stories drawn from a society's history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society's ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness."[3] In both the United States and Canada, a Western myth became a cornerstone of an emerging national identity. Although the Canadianized myth of the West differed profoundly from the American Western myth, each myth served the same purpose of national self-definition. Each Western myth proclaimed its country's national uniqueness, justified the conquest of each country's West, and excused the dispossession of the Native Peoples who lived there.

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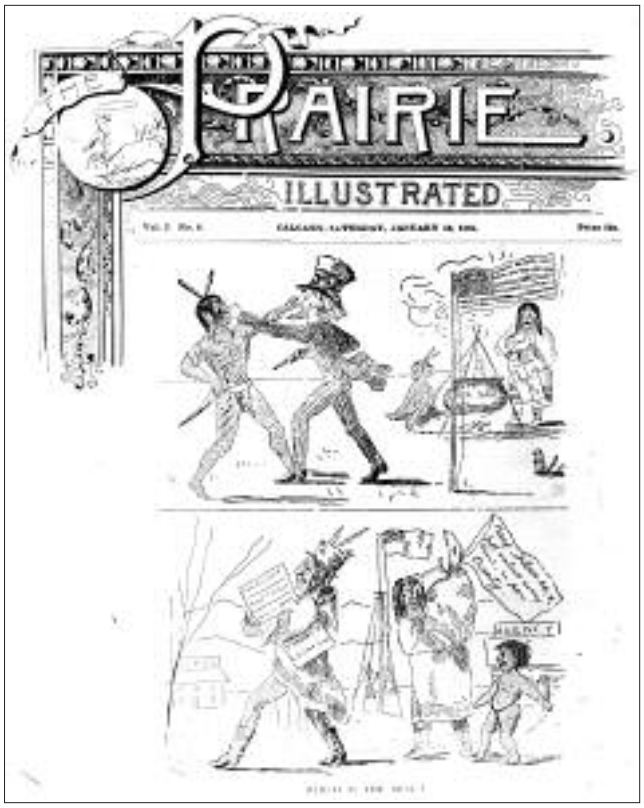
John Herd Thompson is a professor of history at Duke University. His focus is 19th and 20th century North American history. He is at work on Family, Farm and Community: The Rural Northern Plains, 1860-1960, a comprehensive comparative rural history of the region to the post World War II "great disjuncture," examining how institutions, "culture" and historical contingencies shaped such a geographically homogeneous region into the six very different states and provinces of North and South Dakota, Montana, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta.

In the American myth of the West the struggle "between savagery and civilization" on the western frontier determined the history of the United States. This "winning" of the West shaped a unique American national character, and the West was civilized ("won") by individual "pioneers," rather than through government action. The frontier experience forced inherited European traditions to change; American society became more egalitarian and democratic as class distinctions collapsed. The Western frontier also homogenized the United States, molding immigrants of diverse backgrounds into a common Americanism. Ultimately the frontier experience forged a unique American society, distinct from the European societies from which it originated. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner gave the

American myth of the West academic respectability as the "frontier thesis." The art of Frederick Remington, Buffalo Bill's Wild West, and Owen Wister's 1902 best-selling novel *The Virginian* disseminated the myth to broader U.S. (and world-wide) audiences. The "Western" genre thus launched lives on to this day in print, and on cinema and television screens.

The Canadianized myth of the West is the American myth stood on its head. In the Canadianized myth, the United States West plays the role of the villain, the "other" with which the Canadian West is contrasted, and against which Canada must be understood. As the American myth of the West differentiates the United States from Europe, the Canadian version differentiates Canada from the United States. If the American myth of the West is grounded in the pretension that the United States had a "manifest destiny" to cross the continent to the Pacific, an imagined sense of manifest duty animated Canada's Western expansion. In the words of Henry Youle Hind, leader of the expedition sent in 1857 to inventory the land and resources of the Prairie West, Canada's duty was "to plant British institutions and civilization," along with "a spirit of loyalty, of order, and of obedience to the law."[4] Rather than individual "pioneers," in the Canadianized myth of the West government-sponsored expeditions, or the quasi-governmental Hudson's Bay Company, led Canada west. Canada came west to deter American expansionism, and not to displace Native peoples; instead Canada protected them from destruction at the hands of greedy American whisky traders with the North-West Mounted Police (the one institution of the Canadian West that has no obvious U.S. parallel.) Canadian governments made and respected treaties with First Nations, and the NWMP were kinder and gentler to Native peoples than were the U.S. Army or locally-elected U.S. law officers. If Indians were demonized in the American myth of the West, in the Canadianized version they were patronized. Because of the NWMP, and because Canadian settlers had different values than Americans, the vigilantism prevalent in the U.S. West was absent in Canada, and the mythic Canadian West was peaceful, in contrast to the violent "Wild" West of the United States.

The two 1890s political cartoons that accompany this article are documents in the evolving Canadian myth of the West. They are more complicated than modern political cartoons, and contain much more text; each thus



"Which is Best?" [Canadian and U.S. Indian policy compared] cartoon by John Innes, [1863-1941] *The Prairie Illustrated,* Vol. 1 No. 6, Jan 10, 1891, Glenbow NA-795-27

requires some explanation. "WHICH IS THE BEST?" explicitly contrasts U.S. and Canadian Indian policies. It appeared in 1891 as a cover of *The Prairie Illustrated,* a short-lived Saturday illustrated paper published in Calgary, NWT. Artist John Innes [1863-1941] is better known for his paintings of Indians, cowboys, and wildlife than as a cartoonist. The top panel depicts the American West beneath the Stars and Stripes, where an almost naked Native American, armed with a large knife and with his face painted for war, battles a revolver-wielding caricature of Uncle Sam. In the background, a starving Native American woman and her son wait by the boiling stew pot labeled "Uncle Sam," with only "Salt" and "Pepper" to serve with Sam when they cook him for their meal when the struggle ends. The lower panel represents Canada, beneath the British Red Ensign. No individual Canadian appears, but the Canadian government through its "AGENCY" has provided "Beef, Flour, etc, full value every time as per treaty." The food is in such abundance that the First Nations woman doubles over with her load as her chubby son clutches at her skirt. Her well-dressed husband strides ahead toward the "SCHOOL"; unlike his U.S. counterpart, he is becoming educated and therefore "civilized." The reading list under his arm proclaims that he is studying "THEOLOGY" and "RHETORIC," and reading "BILL NYE" (a humorist roughly analogous to today's Dave Barry); he is also learning "SIMPLE EQUATIONS." It would have been instantly clear to any 1890s Canadian reader "WHICH IS THE BEST" of these two scenes, just as the patronizing racism of the cartoonist make clear to any modern reader that Canadian and U.S. policies in the 1890s might not have been so different as Innes imagined them to be.



"Jack Canuck Points With Pride," cartoon by J.[John]W.[Wilson] Bengough, [1851-1923] *The Globe* [Toronto], Jan 14 1898, p. 1. NAC 6436.

"JACK CANUCK 'POINTS WITH PRIDE'" appeared in the Toronto *Globe* in 1898. Cartoonist J.W. Bengough uses "Jack Canuck," the sturdy Canadian everyman in work clothes and a toque, to lecture Uncle Sam on the contrasts between the enforcement of justice in the U.S. and Canadian Wests. The smaller panel in the upper left shows the "WILD WEST – U.S. STYLE", where four vigilantes wave their pistols while the two victims of a lynching dangle from a tree. The second smaller panel depicts the "'Wild West' – Canada Style," in which a North-West Mounted Policeman presents a miscreant to a magistrate for a fair trial. Lest any reader miss the point, the scroll in "Jack Canuck's" hand reprints a dispatch from a *Globe* correspondent describing just such a trial in a makeshift courtroom. "Yes, Jack," says Sam, "I'm a pretty considerable big nation, but I see I kin sit at your feet and learn a few things!" But Sam's sullen look and his recalcitrant posture tell Canadian readers that he has not rejected vigilante violence. Sam has learned nothing from Jack Canuck, and will never learn anything, and Sam's West will always be different from Jack Canuck's.

If the historic U.S. Plains West and the historic Canadian Prairie West were in many ways identical, the myths that evolved in the United States and Canada to explain those Wests were poles apart. Each country invented a mythic West that proclaimed its own self-image. Americans understood their Northern Plains West in terms that helped them to explain themselves; Canadians projected a Prairie West that reflected their own convictions about their moral superiority to the United States. But just as there is much myth in truth, there can come to be much truth in myth. Over time and with repetition, the mythic Wests imagined by Americans and Canadians acquired the power to lead their historic Wests in different directions. Historian Richard White's comments about the United States apply equally well above the forty-ninth parallel: "As people accept and assimilate myth… the myths become the basis for actions that shape history… An imagined West not only reshaped a historical past, but also cast a future partially in its own image."[5]

Endnotes

[1] John Foster Fraser, *Canada As It Is* (London, Paris, New York and Melbourne, 1905), 142-3

[2] Stegner, *Wolf Willow: A history, a story, and a memory of the last plains frontier* (NY, 1966), 81

[3] Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* (NY, 1992), 5-6

[4] Hind cited in John Herd Thompson, *Forging The Prairie West* (Toronto, 1998), 34

[5] White, "*It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West*" (Norman OK & London, 1991), 616, 623