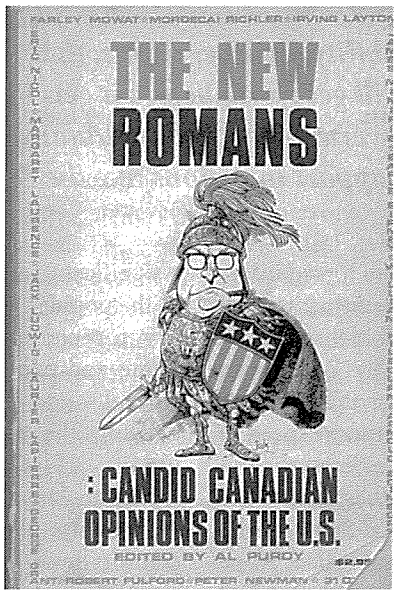
THE NEW ROMANS: CANDID CANADIAN OPINIONS OF THE U.S.

Edited by Al Purdy. Edmonton: Mel Hurtig, 1968.

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It is one thing for Al Purdy to talk about "the lamentably undefended American-Canadian border" (*The New Romans* i), or for David Helwig to chime, "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids have you killed today?" (155), but it is quite another for Barry Lord to proclaim, "we must all join in [a] struggle, a Canadian independence movement [....] We must take Canada back, by whatever means our owner makes necessary" (150-1) or for Raymond Souster to rant that "America / you have been tested and found wanting [....] so wheel out machine guns, unsling the shotguns, line up the sites from the armoured car, shoot to kill, shoot to kill, shoot to kill, kill, kill, kill / America" (68-9). Such militaristic and patriotic flourishes have not been popular in Canada since the Confederation-era exuberance. Moreover, after three decades of postmodernism irony, and in the sudden current of today's militaristic political atmosphere, the anxious anti-U.S. jingoism found in *The New Romans* seems impossibly disjunctive with the contemporary Canadian morale. In fact, the unbridled, unfocussed nationalism of Canada's literati in 1968 is more characteristic of the post-September 11th patriotic demonstrations by Americans, and reflects the bitterness of a deeply-felt cultural anxiety that no longer dominates the contemporary Canadian imagination.



The collection emerges from the mire of one of Canada's most strident nationalistic periods. While the vociferous tonality of the 1960s revolutionary/militaristic lexis creeps into many of the selections, as the examples above indicate, the predominant imaginative metaphor depicts the hypothetical resuscitation of an ailing Canadian corpse (diseased with the spreading influence of Americanization) and the nature of its theoretical antidote. To be fair, most of the book is less capricious and some contributions, such as by Margaret Laurence, endeavour to sympathize with the moral complexity of U.S. cultural predicaments.

Throughout the book's selections, which include a wide assortment of essays, poems, and stories, an eclectic mix of prominent Canadian writers tackle the pressing issue of how Canada, as a nation and a people, ought to navigate the influence of the southern supra-nation and its people. Though their post-colonial striving remains at the front of contemporary political discussions, as always throughout Canada's history, *The New Romans* surges forth with the ardent desire to imagine a "liberated" Canada, even despite their recognition of our U.S.-integrated social, political, and economic associations. Their solutions to the quagmire are overwhelmingly idealistic, often dogmatic or defeatist, and, although cathartic, almost entirely indistinct and unhelpful. The majority of the collection's Canadian nationalism is dependant on vague declarations that, as Frank Watt explains of a similar tendency in the nationalist writing of the Confederation-era, avoid any prescriptive definitions of the basis of their nationalism for not knowing what characteristics of Canada they value, or what characteristics Canada even represents (Watt, "Nationalism in Canadian Literature").

In his selection, Mordecai Richler adroitly complains, "What is so embarrassing is that while we are determined to defend our culture against any comer, nobody is sure what our culture is, how it differs from the British or American, or come to think of it, if we even have one" (*The New Romans* 12). Richler might have noted, in retrospect, the irony that these same writers, including him, without recourse to a sense of their own nation have become some of the surest symbols of its existence.

In fact, what I find so striking about the collection as a whole is that the fumbling – yet passionate – nationalism of *The New Romans* writers functions without any of the vast lexicon of emblematic clichés Canadians have since collected (including the embrace of a flag, an anthem, and the principles – if not the reality – of multiculturalism and internationalism). The collection, more than anything else, demonstrates the development of the nation into a new level of cultural negotiation by dint of contrast. Their arguments and worries do not correspond to the anxieties of a contemporary Canada struggling to maintain its cherished national icons (such as health care, peacekeepers, cultural content regulations, etc.) through the broadening scope of trade liberalization and the development of international governance. To be sure, the U.S. media invasion remains a daily infringement, as it does throughout the world, but the grossly inflated rhetoric of isolationism and protectionism is now more characteristic of the reactionary post-September 11 U.S.A. and functions increasingly as sign of their recent, worrying, unilateralist posturing. The collection *The New Romans* documents a parallel time when Canadian writers also felt under cultural attack and responded in reckless kind.