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A Culture for Canada

SOME persons think culture is something one has, rather than something one is. Others think of culture as being divided, as culture of the cultured, culture of the masses, culture of the educated, culture of the cloistered, and so on. To still others culture is fragmented into music, poetry, sculpture, painting, and many other arts and crafts.

A culture for Canada will include arts, crafts and customs, reinforced by tradition and beliefs. It will take into account our material resources, our scientific knowledge, our religious practices, our family and social systems and our government: the practical things of life as well as the graces. Culture is a pattern of all these and the other ingredients of living expressing the present day life force of our people.

We can't be "cultured" now and again, when we get specially fixed up for it. Culture is a constant state of becoming. We Canadians have not yet (and we are glad of it) reached our fullest development in art, religion, education, and intellectual growth. There is, for a nation which takes the beaver as its emblem, more satisfaction in working toward something than in merely possessing something.

If Canada is to endure as a nation of consequence our cultural progress cannot be looked upon as something incidental, something that takes second place in importance to any of its ingredients.

One of the fascinating things about culture is that it is indefinable. It partakes too much of the spirit of a people to be put in wordy chains.

Attempts to analyse the ultimates of life like faith, love, patriotism, religion and beauty always fail, because these components of culture cannot be reduced to terms lower than themselves.

Culture is not fixed

Culture cannot be accepted as a fixed code by which to live. It is not stagnant, but dynamic. It gives us wide realms to explore. There would be nothing noble

about Canadian culture if we could say: "This is it; this is our absolute and accepted scale of culture; by this we shall live." Culture is not, as some conceive it, an eternal resting on a throne to which we have been elevated by our forefathers, but is something to be hourly achieved and realized at the very peril of losing it.

Our culture is the outcome of our social experience. It includes invention and discovery, the accumulated results of human effort, our philosophical explanations of thought and action, the institutions we have devised to make society a working reality, our sentiments and attitudes. All the past of humanity enters into culture, as well as the more recent contributions of the people of all nations who discovered, settled and developed Canada.

There must, however, be some fundamental features in culture — features of which art, music, sculpture, literature, philosophy, science, family life, and social custom are some of the symbols.

Basic to a lasting culture is the search for truth. Culture is opposed to bigotry, and no one has a right to call himself cultured who cannot listen to both sides of an argument, who refuses to tolerate things merely because they are distasteful to him personally.

Understanding life

Intelligence is a part of culture. When we start to understand the meaning, purpose and conditions of life we are at the beginning of intelligence. We develop in cultural intelligence in the degree in which we use it and accept responsibility for consequences.

Intelligence restrains our innate violent and unsocial impulses, prompts us to seek higher than animal pleasures, and gives us the ability to see things in their proper connections. At the same time, while enabling us to learn all about the sun and the atmosphere and the earth, it leaves us free to enjoy the radiance of the sunset.

Intelligence of this sort does not depend upon formal education. It is not at all rare to come upon comparatively unlettered people who have struck profound depths of thought and have reached the poetry of things. And there are highly educated people, capable of performing clever antics with their minds, who have no deep sense of the worthwhileness of living.

Much of culture is simply unbroken tradition. Each of us is born into a society with a more or less fixed system of relationships. From the immemorial past have come down to us ways of getting a livelihood and approved patterns of family and social conduct.

Without the starting point provided by these traditions, development would be inconceivable. The culture of today in Canada rests upon the preservation of the accomplishments of all who have gone before us in contributing to the building of this country, and the culture of tomorrow depends upon what we of today add to that heritage, not so much in the way of habits and customs, but in ways of thinking.

A shifting world

However, the compulsion of tradition has somewhat lost its force in this shifting world. The rising generation is abandoning in some measure the old established standards in many areas of life, as well as the traditional manner of music and dancing and painting and sculpture.

Arnold J. Toynbee says in *A Study of History*: "The prevailing tendency to abandon our artistic traditions is not the result of technical incompetence; it is the deliberate abandonment of a style which is losing its appeal to a rising generation because this generation is ceasing to cultivate its aesthetic sensibilities on the traditional Western lines." It may be that young people today rebel against respect for tradition because they perceive in it a worship of conventions.

Unrest may not be altogether a bad thing. Every custom of today began as a broken precedent in some past day. Without occasional emotional shakeups we might run the risk of having life become desolately empty. Progress would cease and culture would wither.

We are not quick to accept changes. The existing pattern is more comfortable than any novelty offered us. A new material fact, such as a tool, a gadget for the kitchen, an electronic calculator for the office, is readily incorporated into life. Its efficiency is demonstrable. There is no sentiment involved, hence no emotional resistance is stirred up. But in the realm of thought and personal life the new makes its way slowly.

Some who protest the modern trend in the arts do so on the ground that today's aesthetic taste is lower than that of past ages. But standards of taste vary

from age to age and from continent to continent. What was in the best of taste in the Athens of Pericles, in the Golden Age of France, in the British Isles last year; is not necessarily to the taste of Canadians today.

"Taste," said Ruskin in *The True and the Beautiful*, "is the instinctive and instant preferring of one material object to another without any obvious reason." And that comes as the end result of all our past, expressing itself in a new environment.

The two cultures

When we set up a Royal Commission in 1949 to examine Canada's cultural life we did not call it a commission on culture, but "The Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences." The outcome, a report of more than 500 pages, provides an interested reader with a record of the present state of the cultural arts in Canada.

The first paragraph of the intention of the Commission mentions the ingredients of a nation's culture: "It is desirable that the Canadian people should know as much as possible about their country, its history and traditions; and about their national life and common achievements."

This objective leads naturally to consideration of the ideal presented by Dr. A. R. M. Lower, Professor of Canadian History at Queen's University, in his book *Canada, Nation and Neighbour*. Dr. Lower writes: "The new nation Canada will not be built on oblivion of the past, but on its incorporation into two living traditions which may some day, without losing their own, come to share one common culture."

Canada is, in the words of another writer, Bruce Hutchison, "like a youth starting out on his path, glancing over his shoulder at the ancient glories of his home in Britain or France and, when he looks ahead, dazzled by the glitter of the United States."

For the health of a national culture two things are needed: that it should be unique, and not modelled slavishly after that of one or other of its chief contributors, and that the different cultures woven into one should recognize their relationship to one another, both what they bestow and what they embrace.

Ours is not an uncommon situation. Many other nations have travelled the same road toward integration of apparently conflicting ideals and unity in a common design. There is not yet, but there will come, a commonly accepted symbol of Canadian oneness, and there will develop traditions that will bind our people together in a permanent union.

The only impediment to this development would be our allowing ourselves to harden into watertight compartments. We must preserve our freedom to put

out our hands and help ourselves to what is best in the culture of all the nationalities that make up our population.

As was said picturesquely by a writer about Utopia: "A genuine culture will borrow steadily from other cultures; but it will go to them as the bee goes to the flower for pollen, and not as the beekeeper goes to the hive for honey."

If one section of Canada's people finds really insoluble differences of thought, action or beliefs with another section, then increased association and sincere desire will combine to develop mutual respect and honourable compromise.

Expressions of goodwill are right and good, but a national culture cannot be built on an exchange of compliments. There are differences which cannot be disregarded, and these go far beyond the bounds of language. George J. Lavere said in his article in the Summer issue of *Culture*: "It is in value judgments that the real difference lies."

People from other parts of Canada have come to respect the standard of values of the people of Quebec, particularly their ideal of the family as the essential unit in our society. For their part, the French-Canadians admire the new ways of thought and action, the inventiveness and diversity of talent, shown by British-Canadians and newcomers of many diverse cultures.

Too unsophisticated?

Canadian culture has not yet reached a point where it can be called native, but it is developing out of inherited and borrowed thought something that is distinctively new world.

We are unsophisticated, say some; we are still too close to nature. These critics would have our artists and our poets and our story tellers rush pell-mell from contemplation of the forest and the mountains, the prairies and the tundra, into more artful portrayal of what is loosely called "the soul" of the country. But these forests and mountains and prairies and the land of little bushes are at the foundation of Canadian life. They are lauded by economists and by corporation presidents as the backbone of our economy, the reason for existence and the preservation of our way of life.

Nature put up a grim resistance to settlement of Canada by the French and British adventurers, and that is so recent in our history that it would be surprising if we had already developed into a gay and careless people, unmindful of our beginnings and heedless of the present foundation and support of our prosperity. It may be that out of our unsophistication there will develop a rare culture, quite different from the cultures that are made up of myths and legends, the histories of battles, pageantry and conquest.

Our forefathers were skilful, and their skills had to have survival value in a rigorous land; we have progressed to relative comfort in a society based materially upon invention and adaptation. If we learn to mingle with our respect for the past and our appreciation of the present something of the poetry of it all, we may find ourselves well on the way toward the distinctive culture we seek.

Haste is unnecessary and would be unwise. We did not demand that the Articles of Confederation or the provisions of the Statute of Westminster should automatically and swiftly promote us from adolescence to maturity.

There is, says Mr. Lavere, a true intellectual and artistic life in Canada on both the professional and amateur levels. This cultural vitality is of very excellent quality and is sufficiently self-critical to seek improvement promising an even better future. Canadians are writing good books and good music, and are beginning to create good theatre and good ballet; we have distinguished painters; our film making has won international recognition; our radio is uncovering talented artists. "We need," says the introduction to Robert Weaver's article in the 60th anniversary issue of *Queen's Quarterly*, "no longer be apologetic about 'our lively arts'."

There are, indeed, areas in which we seem to tolerate bad influences. We suffer literature, plastic art and music to be freely displayed which are a humiliation to any man or woman of taste. All that can be hoped for or desired in matters of taste is that toleration will allow the bad to work itself out of our system and that patient effort wisely directed will bring about an infusion of the desirable.

There is no essential stability in a civilized way of life. Whenever civilization stagnates, something like nomadism steps in and stirs it to new efforts. A living culture is constantly changing and increasing in volume and complexity through the addition of new items. This is a natural phenomenon that must be accepted, though we may determine, perhaps rightly, that certain basic articles in our culture must be kept intact despite the hundred magnets that pull us away from them.

Determination of this sort was displayed by the Athenians of 404 B.C. Athens was in the throes of a life and death war. But, strict to their culture, the Athenians presented, at public expense, what had been judged to be the best comedy of the year. It did not matter that the play was violently antimilitarist, ridiculing the army and flaying leaders of the democracy. Says Clive Bell in *Civilization*: "I can recall nothing in history that manifests more brilliantly a public sense of values."

The family

By far the most important channel of transmission of culture is the family. The meagre furniture of a native hut becomes immensely significant because it is grouped around the hearth, symbol of the intimate personal relationship of family life.

The general stock of ideas, prejudices and sentiments picked up by the hearthside impinge on thought and actions throughout life. Statesmen and financiers, educators and artisans, men and women in all activities of life, are influenced in their decisions and actions by the intangibles absorbed in home life.

Culture develops from the intimacy of the home through the community, the province and the nation. The nation is described by St. Augustine as an association of reasonable beings bound together by a common agreement as to the objects they love. Opposed to culture is barbarism, and barbarians are people who insist on doing what they please, without submitting to any rule.

Cultured people are distinguished by the superiority of their thoughts, their enjoyment of beauty, their effort to improve themselves and their environment, and their willingness to look at something new.

Of all these qualities none is more vital to culture than the last. A person, however well-informed, is not cultured unless he can look at a thought or an event or a belief from at least two sides. To enjoy life perfectly a man must be free from taboos, prudery, superstition and prejudice. He will recognize all degrees of shadings between those who agree with him and the people who don't.

Broadmindedness is one pillar of culture. Another is a sense of values. Clive Bell says (in *Civilization*) that the cultured person has intellectual curiosity that is not only boundless but fearless and disinterested. He is tolerant, liberal and unshockable. If he is not always affable and urbane, at least he is not truculent, suspicious or overbearing. He distinguishes between ends and means, brushes aside all cant about "rights", and pricks the frothy bubbles of moral indignation with the sharp point of his sense of values.

On being what we are

Perhaps the best recipe for a culture for Canada is just to have the courage to be what we are. We must be free intellectually to deal with whatever comes our way. A book of Canadian essays, published this year by The Ryerson Press, Toronto, edited by Malcolm Ross, Professor of English Literature at Queen's University, is happily entitled *Our Sense of Identity*.

We need not fret about the results of our efforts nor about the importance of our individual contributions so long as we act sincerely according to our sense of values. Our lives, individually, are links in the chain, and what we do has national and universal significance.

A culture for Canada is not a culture for today only. People with a sound sense of values are capable of sacrificing obvious and immediate goods to the more subtle and remote. They give up comfort for beauty; they prefer a liberal education, one that teaches how to live maturely, rather than one that teaches how to gain. They desire the richest and fullest life obtainable, a life which contains the maximum of vivid and exquisite experience and contributes something to the future.

If Canadians individually make the most of their sense of values, that will prevent the country's culture from evolving into a sophisticated mélange of gaudy trappings gathered near and far.

We cannot plan culture as we do political change and resource development. Culture can never be wholly conscious. But if we wish to give meaning to life — perhaps even a special meaning to Canadian life — then we must take steps to put ourselves in the way of experiences and projects which contribute to and develop our culture.

No one need live meanly

No one need live meanly in Canada except by choice. Those who overvalue physical comforts, the material things of the world, and ease of work, are living a sparse cultural existence, and cannot be rated high in an appraisal of civilization. There is no need to live the rigorous life of our forefathers, but if we banish it from memory we are depriving ourselves of the best, most logical and most thrilling base for our culture.

One of the first terrestrial plants known to man was found in the Gaspé Peninsula. It is a poor little plant, a foot high, without leaves. Sir John William Dawson discovered it about the time of Confederation. It preceded the luxuriant and elegant trees and flowers of the carboniferous period by some seventy-five million years.

There seems to be a lesson in this discovery for those who are impatient for displays of cultural progress in Canada. It will not take so long for our culture to develop as it did for Sir John's spindly little plant to grow into our vast forests, but it will take time. Culture is not any more magically manufactured than are trees and flowers.

We are seeking a harmony of culture that will bind together four qualities, truth, beauty, adventure and art, and this harmony, exclusive as it is of egotism, self-seeking and immediacy, can be attained only as a process of growth extended in time.