

arts

The corporate eagle gobbles up Canadian cultural carrion

by Richard Bauman

Who's Afraid of Canadian Culture? by S.M. Crean; General Publishing Co.; 1976; 279 pp; \$7.95 paper).

In her recently published book, *Who's Afraid of Canadian Culture?*, S.M. Crean contends that domination by American interests of our country's culture is making it impossible for Canadians to learn about themselves.

The chief portion of Crean's book is given over to separate chapters that each survey the extent to which the Canadian "identity" is reflected in the fine arts, in literary and trade books and magazines, in television and radio broadcasting, and in our schools and universities. Her conclusion is that in none of these fields has there been a genuine attempt to make visible a specifically Canadian culture.

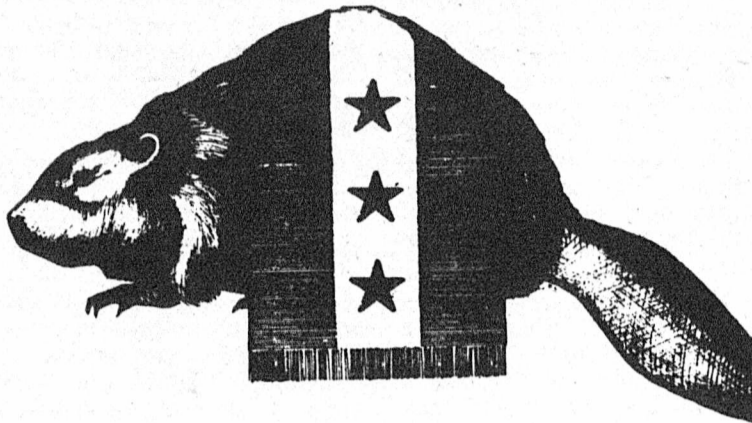
Crean supplies ample statistical data, as well as brisk historical accounts, to support her charge that what ought to be the most Canadian of institutions have become "Americanized." This has happened because of the avarice of parent corporations that maintain offspring in Canada, and because of the bungling of our government's

officials and those genteel mossbacks who have been installed (or have installed themselves) on the executives of major organizations devoted to the development and public display of the arts in Canada.

Cultural Monopoly

The Canadian feature-film industry has languished for years because there have been few limits placed on the operation of American-owned cinema chains which control all three levels of film production, distribution, and exhibition. This is a prime example of cultural "monopoly," under the conditions of which Canadian-produced films stand little chance of reaching a wide Canadian market. It is likelier that they will show up "at your local art gallery's festival of *avant-garde* film than at your local Odeon."

Television possesses a similar record of failure to employ and reward Canadian writers, producers and performers. Despite the CRTC's attempt in 1970 to lay down minimum content regulations, network executives, especially those of the commercial network,



have never had to exercise much cleverness in order to find ways to continue their practice of importing American shows that can be bought for a slight fraction of the expense that it takes to create a new Canadian show. As if the situation were not bad enough already, the rapid establishment of cable television systems promises a new flood of American programming that will undermine the last prospect that some day Canadians will view on their screens only programs with special significance for Canadians, sponsored by Canadian firms.

Still time for redemption

These examples represent many that Crean uses to build her case in favour of a cultural nationalism. She thus joins the swiftly-widening circle of Canadian prophets who are trying to rouse in us a recognition of our Babylonian captivity. This Old Testament comparison is not drawn carelessly here, for lurking between the lines of Crean's skillful documentation of the state of Canadian culture is a kind of scorn that conditions could be allowed to become so woeful, as well as an obstinate hope that there is still time enough for redemption provided we all can be brought to strive for it.

Although her book relies on

the citation of figures and incidents, Crean's purpose is not merely to inform. She challenges the conduct of those officials whose duty it has been to ensure each Canadian's access to art and entertainment. This challenge is to be taken seriously by every citizen, so that what he is able to see on television or on stage, or view in a gallery, or find in a bookstore or library becomes a pressing issue involving the preservation of a culture.

The title of Crean's book is in the form of an agitational question. It is as much designed to summon the reader to action as to reveal to him the nature of the book's subject.

The prophetic zeal with which Crean occasionally draws her conclusions tends to mar her analysis. It is not sufficient to claim, that American programming on television leads to the "Americanization" of the viewer, and that Canadian programming would have a different result. The problem may not be solved simply through the replacement of an American variety show with a Canadian one. The distinctive Canadian culture that Crean believes is presently invisible, may not be the sort of thing that television can serve.

By the same reasoning, Canada has an admirable history of documentary (as against feature) films, and it might be timelier and more reflective of our culture to emphasize a

different type of film altogether rather than try to emulate the success of Hollywood feature-films, which too often are dependent on a formula.

Continentalism; a species of treason

A graver difficulty in Crean's study lies with her use of the imprecise verb "Americanize," and the imprecise phrase "Canadian identity."

The trouble with speaking of the Americanization of something is that first "Americanize" is ugly. There is something so artificial about the concept that one wonders whether the person who uses it has in mind. The objects of this process have ranged from the Americanization of Emily to the Americanization of professional hockey to the Americanization of the executive branch of our federal government. Needless to say, there are three different processes involved here, not one. Second, and this is of particular relevance to *Who's Afraid of Canadian Culture*, the term is often used to imply a degree of malignancy on the part of Americans. In the final chapter of her book, Crean classifies the attitude of "Continentalism" (by which is meant something like a free and easy attitude toward the influx of American culture) as a species of treason. This is an overwrought gesture that damages the tone of Crean's book.

The notion of a "Canadian identity" is poorly explained by Crean. She argues that what she calls "Official Culture" has long suppressed the culture Canadians do have. This has happened in the name of international standards and traditions of art. Crean's point is that there is an inherent value in showing Canadian art, regardless of its excellence when measured against these standards. Underlying this argument are the assumptions that there are no standards of excellence that cut across cultural lines, and there are no relevant traditions except those which arise within a single culture. (Crean's manner of expressing this is: "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." Let this be a lesson in how a cliché murders an interesting argument with dispatch.)

These assumptions would lead us to judge Canadian works of art as insular phenomena, by comparing them each with the other. Yet this would still not help us in judging what is distinctive about Canadian culture and what our national identity is. In order to understand the latter we are obliged to lay what is representative of a so-called Canadian tradition alongside other traditions and movements. In the process, of course, we may find those features that Canadian culture has in common with other cultures. The stress on the search for an "identity," as all of us know from adolescence (or at least from adolescent psychologists) has a blinkering effect.

Who's Afraid of Canadian Culture is not the survival manual that its cover puffs it up to be. It is a polished study that contains the latest evidence, the sources of which are always spelled out. It enlightens, although its rhetorical sections sometimes have the force of an incantation rather than a message or report.

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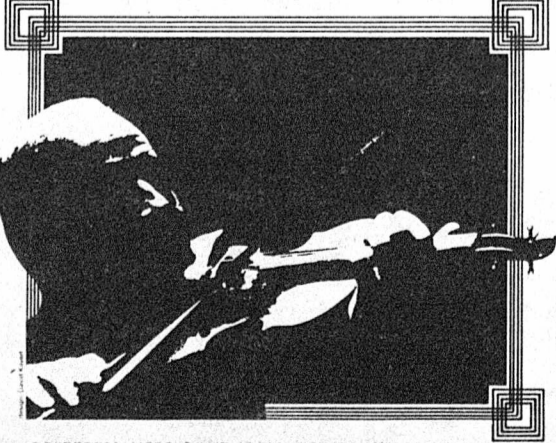
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