

□ ON CANADIAN CULTURE □

Few Canadians would give Voltaire the credit for being a father of Canadian culture. His offhand remarks about Canada being a "few acres of snow" subscribe to the cultural cringe some Canadians have felt in their growing nation. The great French intellectual *sourpuss* wrote off the second largest piece of real estate in the world because he knew nothing about it. As such he is the mentor of many modern Canadians who know as little respectively of modern Canadian life.

The real estate Voltaire described was inhabited by bands of men and women from Asia. The concept of Canada for the last 400 years has been European. The European ability to plant (or impose) systems and institutions on virgin territory is the history of colonialism. The last four centuries in Canada have seen the clash of empires (white and native), the effects of a transplanted Industrial Revolution, Manifest Destiny, four significant wars (Boer, two World Wars, and Korea), a Depression, and mass immigration from all over the world. In a smaller nation these events might have derailed even the best of motives, but Canada's ability to survive and balance has become a part of the national signature. To flourish or not to flourish, that is now the cultural question.

Canadians have responded to their stark and beautiful landscape with fear, awe, respect, lasciviousness, and protectiveness. We have raped and slash-burned many forested hills, and we have created more square kilometers of national parkland than any other country in the world. We have destroyed the Beothuk Indians of Newfoundland, and we have signed treaties on pelagic fishing to protect the species. We have

taken a world lead on human rights and women in development, on acid rain and the fight against famine. In all, we are not as lily white as a few acres of snow, but we have come a long way in a short time and will go much further if we keep up the pace.

Self-knowledge is the greatest asset of a democracy apart from a healthy economy. For Canadians as for other peoples, the arts and humanities, everyday customs and values, and knowledge of the international dimension, are the cultural signs that make us self-aware. George Woodcock writes that "...a national literature is an essential element in the formation of a national character. It is not merely the record of a country's mental progress: it is the expression of its intellectual life, the bond of national unity and the guide of national energy." The definition applies to other disciplines of a cultural nature.

A vital factor in Canadian culture is its growth from every corner of the country. There is no obvious culture center in terms of creativity in this country in the arts, literature, filmmaking, or crafts. Several cities have excellent museums, galleries, theatres, and concert halls which are the outlets for creations, but Canada's cultural strength rests in its geographic diversity. And increasingly, as more exotic

cultures plant roots through immigration to Canada, a new dimension is added to this diversity.

1986 is the best of times and the worst of times for Canadian culture. The CBC is producing world-class television and radio productions, while its budget is being slashed. Excellent books of short stories, novels, and poetry are being published. Gaston Miron's *L'Homme Rapailé* and Alice Munro's *The Progress of Love* are examples of world-class literature. The Toronto Symphony has just made a highly successful tour of Europe carrying Canadian musical interpretation of non-Canadian classical music to Europeans — not coals to Newcastle. We can forget the "search for excellence" as if the grail were unattainable. We have a track record of excellence in many fields that must be built upon with the help of educated audiences, readers of books, critics, and those who simply need cultural tools for leisure activities.

But the economic hard times (sic), which see management consultants flourishing and artists struggling, must not allow a mercenary attitude to invade the necessary support for the so-called abstract pursuits of the arts and humanities. Canadian self-knowledge affects our political sense of our own sovereignty; without it, we would have

