

Suffering from an inferiority complex

by Barbara Wade
of the Charlatan

for Canadian University Press

If Canada were an internationally recognized political and economic power, its literature would inevitably be regarded just as highly. Canadian works would be regarded as classics, the standards by which the rest of literature would be judged.

So says Carleton English professor Robin Mathews in his new collection of essays, *Canadian Literature: Surrender or Revolt*. Mathews believes that economic and political domination have everything to do with what is perceived as cultural genius. It is with this theory in mind that he explores what he sees

as a Canadian inferiority complex.

The result is a fascinating, but aggravating book. Mathews writes extremely well, and whether or not one agrees with what he says, he is never boring.

Mathews insists that one cannot consider the actions of any individual character in literature without placing him in a social and political context. He suggests that any work of literature glorifying the individual is an Americanism, because the lone hero figure is part of the American frontier mythology.

This train of thought leads Mathews to conclude that the only literature which retains a true Canadian identity are

those works where the individual is destroyed. He maintains, quite correctly, that this is the case in numerous Canadian novels such as Susannah Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* and John Richardson's *Wacousta*.

Mathews makes a fundamental error in linking individualism so strongly with national identity in culture and literature. The individual or hero figure was prevalent in literature long before the American frontier ever existed.

Individualism is a part of the literature of so many nations that it is foolish to perceive it as exclusive to any one country. It seems particularly strange to ascribe it to a nation as young as the United

States. What of Ulysses, Moses or Lancelot?

Mathews' ideas about individualism and Americanization extend beyond the realm of literature.

"Women's liberation in Canada, for instance, has been tossed and torn by a conflict between a drive for full participation, for communal equality, arising, I suggest, out of Canadian identity, pitted against a drive for hyper-individualism in which the male is the enemy, arising out of U.S. theories and concepts."

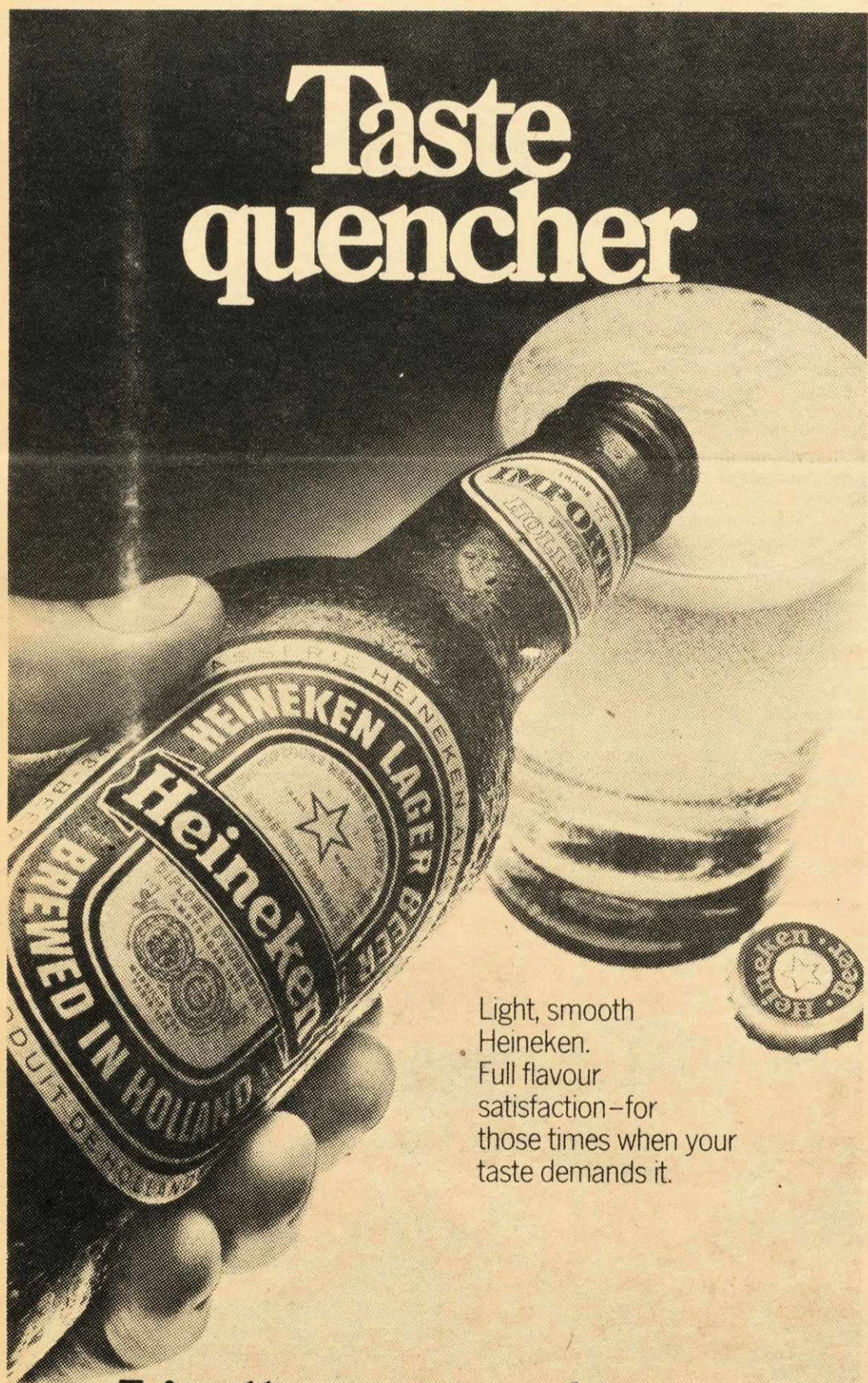
This is definitely getting carried away. We can hardly blame the United States for our sexual identity crises.

Mathews, as the cliché goes, is not anti-American but pro-Canadian. He defends patriotic Canadian writing to an unrealistic extent. One example of this tendency is his suggestion that Duncan Campbell Scott was a poet who displayed "greatness . . . in the handling of the native people."

As Deputy Minister for Indian Affairs from 1913 to 1932, Scott's handling of the Indians was, in his own words, to ensure the "gradual

assimilation (of Indians) with his fellow (white) citizens." He has been condemned by George Manuel, of the National Indian Brotherhood, for his attempts to eradicate Indian customs. His poems, in particular *The Onondaga Madonna*, can hardly be described as empathetic. But because he was not influenced by British or American traditions, he remains free from criticism.

While some of Mathews' theories border on nationalistic paranoia, he really does stimulate the reader to consider the various influences on Canadian culture and literature. *Surrender or Revolt* is well worth reading, even if it only serves to strengthen your differing ideas about Canadian literature.



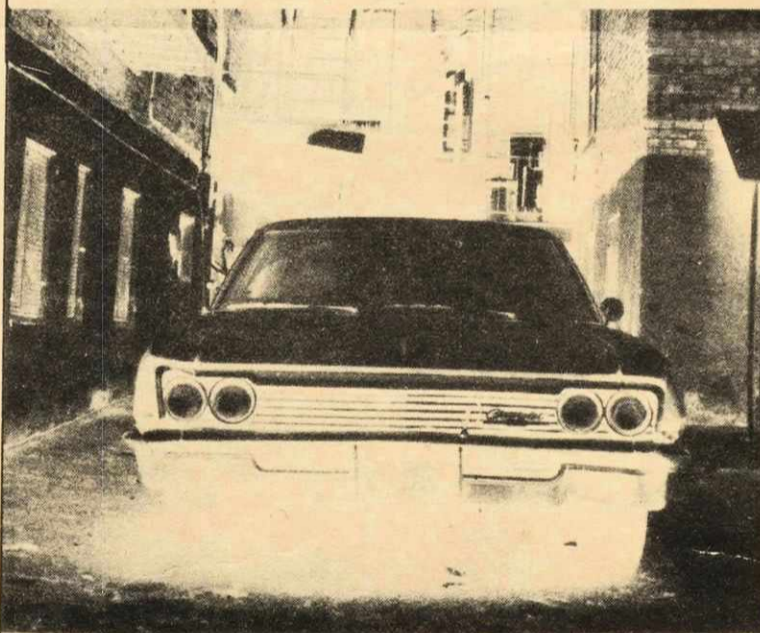
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