

Images of Canada in the British and French press

by T.A. Keenleyside

It has become fashionable among Canadian scholars and statesmen over the last decade or so to ascribe to Canada a status close to or the equivalent of that of a great power. Terms such as "largest of the small powers," "foremost nation" and "principal power" have been employed in this redefining of Canada's location on the spectrum of international power. In an article last year in *The Globe and Mail*, Alan Gottlieb, Canada's ambassador to the United States, carried this process still further, contending that not only is Canada by objective measure a great power, but that it "has come to be seen...as a major power with the international interests and capabilities such a term implies." While most Canadians were "very comfortable thinking of themselves as a middle power," Gottlieb was not convinced that this was any longer appropriate or desirable. Rather, he contended, it was important that we "see ourselves as others see us," as a major power (*Globe and Mail*, October 29, 1987).

More power than "power"

Comfortable with the appellation "middle power," and recently returned from one of many lengthy sojourns abroad, this author read the above assertion of our distinguished ambassador with characteristic Canadian diffidence and skepticism. Following Canadian affairs through the French press over the preceding year had been a vexing and not very time-consuming preoccupation, and it had not yielded anything to suggest that we were seen by this one of our mother countries as anything other than a rather plodding middle power. A casual perusal for several weeks of a regional daily, *Nice-Matin*, turned up two references to Canada. One was merely a paragraph buried in a story on the annual commemoration of the liberation of the border town of Menton referring to a French-Canadian lieutenant who had given his life in the liberation and was now honored by the annual laying of a wreath at the City Hall. The other was a photograph of a proud, roguish-looking Ontarian standing beside his own personal Stonehenge, constructed from the carcasses of wrecked automobiles stood on end in a farmer's field. "Yes," the French reader could say affirmatively of Canada, "it played its dutiful part in the Second World War," and "Yes, like every other country, it has its share of kooks." Not a blank, perhaps, but a rather opaque canvas.

Conversations with the French of the area not surprisingly almost invariably disclosed an ignorance of Canada that matched this neglect in the media. Like the skis on the rooftop of the carload of Americans in August, there were many observations to gloat over — reaffirmations of the comfortable, old images of how others see us:

"D'où venez-vous? Montreal?"

"Non. Windsor."

Rien.

"C'est près de Toronto."

Rien.

"Dans la province d'Ontario."

Rien.

"A côté de Québec."

"Ah! Oui."

"Un métro à Toronto? Non!"

"Si, il y a un métro!"

"Mais, non!"

There was one proposal near the end of the year that was meant to be complimentary: a suggestion that one now write a book of French recipes to introduce English-speaking Canadians to the culinary delights of France!

British stereotypes

Previous, protracted periods spent in Britain had been marked by a similar difficulty in following Canadian affairs in the media, a plethora of stereotypical images at the popular level and patronizing observations by elites. There were, it is true, at one time two exceptions to neglect of Canada in the British media and to concomitant ignorance, if not to negative images, of the country at the mass level. In the seventies the media assiduously followed the exploits of the former Maggie Trudeau, and every Briton seemed informed on the subject of the seal hunt — it marked Canadians as a primitive, barbarous people, too unrefined to see that the seal hunt was sin and the foxhunt sport. Arrogant dismissal has always tended to be the rule at the elite level. "You Americans come here thinking you know everything," an English professor told his appropriately modest Canadian student many years ago. "But I'm afraid that we have to prick that bubble." And when an argument was on the verge of being lost a defensive don resorted to his last winning weapon: "The problem with you is that you're not English, are you?"

These are admittedly random, subjective judgments of how Canada is viewed in its mother countries. What empirically is the perception? Does the objective record show that the media of Britain and France accord Canada both the frequency and character of coverage due one of the great powers of the international system? Or does the evidence confirm the traditional, comfortable image Canadians have of themselves as neglected and misunderstood by their mother countries? Answering these questions is important in assessing Canada's actual power, for power is contingent in part upon perceptions. The responsiveness of other countries to Canadian goals and objectives is determined to a degree by their assessments of its relative capacity to protect and advance its interests. Those assessments are also to

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