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COMMUNITY AND CULTURE

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If I attempted tonight to build up with finality a definition of either of the important words in my title, I should be in hard trouble. As a working expedient, by Community I am going to mean simply a group of persons whose togetherness makes it natural and easy for them to be aware of one another and aware of being mutually conditioned. Your own Fredericton or your own Maritimes may be examples. By culture I don't mean a monochrome with a drawl, I mean the sum total of elements, hereditary and environmental, from the past and in the present, which make a particular way of life an instrument of satisfaction and self-perpetuation for any group. Our Indians for instance are a disintegrating society because they have lost their culture pattern. I'd like to begin very simply and frankly.

We in the rest of Canada (which by the way, whether you like it or not, is your Canada) think of you in the Maritimes as a community set apart, peculiarly conditioned and isolated in mutuality. You yourselves I am told like to preserve Community differentiations among yourselves. A Nova Scotian I am told is insulted if called a Maritimer; he feels he is not being sufficiently dissociated from New Brunswick. I am further told that to suggest to an Islander that he is anything other than an Islander is to besmirch his reputation. I don't know whether New Brunswickers are jealously proud of New Brunswick and nothing else or not. That would be sad if true.

In other words you know the meaning of Community, you have your own definitions for yourselves. I suspect that some of you are old enough still to be able to characterize a place called Canada. I suspect you could describe Ontario rather vividly, and some of you have meanings for an entity called Quebec. I should be surprised to learn that any of you know or care very much about a drab and dubious area west of the Great Lakes known as the Prairie West or about a lost province beyond the mountains. You live here envied by the sea and are mostly conscious of yourselves and, perhaps now and then, if it's a matter of potatoes, apples and fish, of the Yankees.

I am having, as you see, a bit of fun with you and with myself. I am displaying my rashness and perhaps my ignorance and giving you a chance to laugh at me — or with me.

But honoured by this occasion as I am, I can, with real delight, point out the positive tribute underlying this foolery. You are yourselves. You possess traditions which honour you and made the rawer parts of Canada, in some moods, envy you. History has made itself rich reality here. Behind closed doors, on your streets, along your coasts, deep in your woods and beside your flashing rivers, in your ways of talking and your ways of thinking, is a life, a way of life and a culture, if you like. Your communities have bred it and your communities preserve it. This Campus with its history and its character is one of your symbols.

Even before I argue it, I think my point is clear: a community and its culture, living and expanding, or fading and withering, is a vital and interesting phenomenon.

I remember once, years ago, in England, I came to the door of a little old lady in a vine and rose covered cottage behind a low wall. She spoke of the buses which were

beginning to establish their mesh-work of scheduled runs over the face of England. "But they don't come within two miles of me yet, sir," the little old lady said. She was half afraid and half excited over the threatened invasion of her culture. As I had tea with her, breathing the breath of English roses, I knew what that culture meant to her.

On one occasion Merrill Denison, on his way to the Middle West, stopped off at a lumber camp. He wanted to hear the stories, the songs and turns of speech. He was an honest mixer and he would have absorbed without condescension. But they were all listening to Rose Marie on the radio from New York. Somebody had brought a radio into the camp and poor Merrill was heart-broken.

There is what may be called an axe-handle, a plough-handle, a rose cottage culture. There is that whole complex of skills and values which lies about and in a man when, with arm outstretched, he casts his eye along a newly smoothed axle-helve or when he feels the silky roundness of plough handles or the running line of a net in his controlling grip. At such a moment, in the process of his function and the use of his skill, man and community are one. Man, his environment and its processes, mutually fulfill themselves in a self-preserving activity on behalf of an agreeable life.

Think for a moment of one of our typical Ontario hamlet communities I know such a one. There are the seasonal processes. There are the recurring harvests—the berry, the nut, the ice, the maple sugar, the muskrat, fur harvests; and along with these the recurring harvest of the fields. The rhythm of all this and man's satisfaction in his adjustment to that rhythm makes for a way of life, self-contained and sometimes rich.

I am sure you know what I mean by this talk of group and regions as cultures. We talk of French-Canadian culture. Someone has suggested, rightly or wrongly, there is a culture in the farm tradition of Ontario. There are what we call backward cultures concerning which the statisticians tell us that the infant mortality rate is high or the percentage of illiteracy high. Our school books have told us about the Roman way and the Greek mind. We had an example — a tragic one — of what someone called the Singapore mind, and anytime nowadays you may have a rash soul suggesting that there is a Canadian mind. All these in one way or another are examples of isolated ways of behavior, ways of being,—of developed techniques, within an area for the agreeable preservation of a society within itself in terms of the means available. The Lunenburg fishermen on our East Coast have their way of life; the Gaspe fishermen theirs; the men and women who depend on the New Brunswick pulp and lumber woods theirs. There is, I suppose, what might be called a horse-racing culture in Prince Edward Island.

But today we face all over the world the invasion of communities and the break-up of cultures. Very very many years ago as a boy, again in England, I purchased a small packet in a penny slot machine. It was gum with careful instructions as to its use: it must, the little red wrapper said, be masticated continuously, but under no circumstances swallowed. That was the American invasion. That was the beginning mark for a change in English culture. There is a straight road between that episode and the lean which today has seemed to put John Bull's Britain a purchase in Uncle Sam's American pocket.

But when we talk today of the invasion and breakdown or corruption or amelioration of these cultures we need not assume we witness the death of human culture taken in this sense; we may only be going on into the new conditions and patterns of a new kind of self-preserving and self-justifying life for humans. There is the culture of the jack-knife whittler in the sun. But there is also the culture of the modern machinist at his lathe, proudly solicitous for his nice exactitudes. There may be the self-preserving culture of nuclear energy.

Whatever its significance and its effect, however, the process of change and adaptation goes on. It may disturb or frighten us but we can't stop it. New modes of travel, new modes of communication are getting in their work. Some of us fear the standardization which seems to be involved; everybody the world over may be going to buy United States radios for instance. We deplore the collapse of weak cultures or delicate vulnerable cultures under the life of the stranger and the stronger. We wonder, for instance, what the gain or loss may be as the United States gives up isolationism for a possible business imperialism. An Anglo-U. S. fusion could mean the breakdown of at least one sovereignty. It could be a step to wards an ultimate world society, towards the culture of world community if used constructively with magnanimity and seriousness. Among concerned and serious minds, of course, the only safeguard for the process lies in a developed sense of brotherhood, of human community, and in co-operation more and more extended rather than in the perpetuation of the idea of mastery and exploitation.

But the fact is that whenever we are aware of it we are disturbed and frightened by this breakdown of parochial self-sufficiency. The breakdown seems to take away the only society and pattern we know through which we think we can preserve ourselves agreeably and leaves us without sure substitutes. Our trouble is, I think, that we are literally "between two worlds, one dead, the other waiting to be born." In truth the only self-preserving society now possible to us is a world society, but our technical and imaginative adjustments are not done of the latest custom, no scheme of self-preserving and self-justifying relationships for the new order of things, no way of keeping the best of the old and going on under the new inevitable conditions. It is not yet a new order. We have no established techniques for making self-preservation on the new scale agreeable and probable.

All this brings me to my point again. The phenomenon of communities and their culture, living, or threatened and disintegrating, is our peculiar and pressing business as thinking and feeling humans in today's world. Today fate has given us nuclear energy and the atomic bomb and we face unbelievable change. The illustrations can be in simple terms if you like. Once in times past we gave the natives whisky and guns and syphilis, and we changed them. Work out techniques for the universal distribution of the fannies, and you have psychiatrists and mothers huddling in drawing-rooms at troubled little private meetings and even fathers and Brook Chisholm wondering what in the world is happening to us.

My point is that in the sense that I have been using the word cultures change and now cultures emerge. I think we are on the edge of a world culture to rise to meet it. We face a wholly new environment problem

in adjustment to a self-preserving and agreeable way of life. I suppose that there are strong implications for us as Canadians. I teased you a bit at the beginning over your own isolationism. Canada is made up of pockets and sub-pockets of communities and cultures too weak to be self-sustaining and too unimaginative to co-operate in new syntheses. Our Dominion-Provincial relations problem, with its multiple facets is one example; our major duality of race, language and religion another.

But I did not accept your gracious invitation in order to be negative. It is the positive side of Canada's challenge in this time of shock and change which interests me most. I think some day the historians will tell our children's children how momentous were those hours. I think it's both a great game and a great duty for those of us alive now to try to comprehend what is happening and to take up our responsibilities as we see them in our own Canadian terms. Remember our history and look at our geography. We are a great world citadel of Roman Catholicism. We are pressed upon the point of being overwhelmed by Americanism. We are caught in the processes which are inevitably changing one of the world's great imperialisms. The mighty Russian experiment is on our Northern borders. We are not only physically at the cross-roads of the world. Ideologically, we are at the very vortex of our contemporary human tension. We performed what we called our war effort. We have become a big business concern. Our young people have gone to the far places of the world and come home again. Lifted from their localities, they have also cross-crossed their own country and made discoveries. They have slipped back now to their home places and laid their uniforms aside and they wonder about themselves and the Canada they find.

We who are older wonder too. We wonder if we have a community and if there can be discovered therein a self-preserving culture. If we are bewildered I think there are a few things which, if seen clearly, will at least suggest what is happening. Canadian history and Canadian geography for instance, are more significant and operative in this accelerated world than ever before. This means for us, as I have said, close contact with the four great powers most obviously conditioning the world.

If I were to offer, not a definition, but a working description of an alert Canadian citizen just now, I could say he is one (man or woman) increasingly aware of being North American in the Continental sense without being American in the National sense. That suggests the diminution of modification of the British tradition and recognizes the fact of this continent as Canada's inevitable base.

In other words, we are just now,—leaving Rome and Russia as shaping influences aside,—in the process of reviewing simultaneously and freshly our British tradition and our American environment. Somebody tells us, for instance, we are an independent nation now: Look at our armed forces and our growing trade. As that we look wryly, not East across the Atlantic, but South over the invisible line. Then somebody tells us that, whatever our material

achievement we have no centred community of feeling, no national essence, no culture; we look then at our racial and linguistic diversities and wonder if the British tradition, misused, has stupefied us.

I should like to look at these two things for a little while, the British tradition and our American environment, if you will bear with me.

Take first the fact of the British tradition among us. There are some to agree that the tradition is being rapidly corroded and disintegrated in our midst. Proof is alleged to lie in the way the United Empire Loyalist legend is being re-interpreted; in the way the Daughters of the Empire cult and the Navy League propaganda is being smiled at, in the grinning among us to save the Empire from the lesser breeds, are understood.

For me there is no cause for concern in all this life. The true operating force of the British tradition among us is not in the custody of any of the organizations of persons mentioned. The true potency lies deeper and has a much subtler emanation.

But there is a queering about the British tradition as I see it operative. It works, I think, a good deal like that something piped by a boy in Thessaly. Yeats, you know, once said that he never contemplated some great event in the world's story and a momentous accomplishment in a great legislature without thinking that perhaps it all happened because of something that a boy piped in Thessaly.

Francis Thompson suggested this intransparability of all things in his way when he said:

"I do think my tread
Touching the daisies in the
meadow grass
Flickers the unwithering stars"

The British tradition works among us because Burns wrote "A Man for a That", because Keats wrote "An Ode to the Nightingale", and Shelley "An Ode to the West Wind," because British History is well taught in our schools, because no serious student leaves the major courses in our Universities without making contact with 19th Century British thought through Carlyle, Mill, Arnold, Ruskin, Butler, Morris, Shaw. Underlying all these is of course Shakespeare and Milton and the whole range of English poetry. All that material, the hard clear deposit of the British mind, is bred into the Canadian mind. It is literally the food of the schools. It helps to make us what we are and it comes out in our politics, our courts of law, their atmosphere and processes, in our social behaviour, and religion, our economic theory. I think the teaching of British history and literature in our schools and Universities has fed us on the British tradition.

But I think there is a curious footnote to be added. I think the result of the influence on the Canadian mind is to refine and idealize that British tradition for us—indeed perhaps to make us a little romantic and unrealistic about it. It is a fact, isn't it, that the Canadian is often considered embarrassedly idealistic and romantic about the beauty of British life and tradition. Ask a Frenchman. Indeed, one might sometimes ask a Scot, particularly when British tradition is defined too narrowly as English tradition. Ask a contemporary Scotch nationalist to comment on the average Canadian's concept of Bonnie Scotland as created by Barry and Bobby Burns, a land of simple living and high thinking unburied by manufacturing, thwarted industry, and in many

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