

Beyond the Rubicon

The New Romans: Candid Canadian Opinions of the U. S., edited by A. W. Purdy. *Edmonton, Alberta: M. G. Hurtig, 1968. 165 pp. \$2.95.*

THE NEW ROMANS has caused something of a stir in Canada—at least among those who relish ejaculatory journalism or are enthusiastic about any twisting of the Eagle's tail plumage. Nor has the book gone unnoticed in the United States—it has been discussed by William Buckley, among others. I am not sure just why this brief and disorganized collection of mismatched, angel's-eye views of the U.S. should have provoked much comment. By and large, the contributions to the volume (both prose and verse incidentally) are either banal or

hysterical. Even those few pieces generally complimentary to the American culture are shallow and often appear to admire those features of American life reasonably viewed as dubious by perceptive Americans themselves. I say this, because *The New Roman's* principal quality is its naïvete, exuberant and usually self-righteous. What makes the book interesting is not its content (compiled from a curious assemblage of angry young poets, aging *literati* and "pop" journalists), but rather its possible use as a bit of evidence in the task of unscrambling the "Canadian mind."

Generally speaking, Americans have shown little curiosity about what is going on in the Canadian mentality, and if this book reveals a certain ignorance about the United States, it is only fair to say that what goes on in the vast tract of northern real estate is virtually a blank in the American consciousness. It is not of immense im-

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portance, I grant, to Americans to investigate what Canadians are thinking about, for the simple reason that Canadian opinion has had little palpable effect on American life. But circumstances are changing that situation, if for no other reason than certain marked divergences in points of view are arising, as is evidenced by *The New Romans*. Canadians now see fit to offer criticism and moral remonstrance and, not the least, America finds itself the target of bitter and passionate condemnation from a segment of a neighboring society with which it shares a common language, political and legal institutions, and, in some respects, a parallel culture. This is a phenomenon worth looking into.

There is no doubt that the emotional, moralistic, and frequently chauvinistic vituperations of many of the contributors to *The New Romans* represent a sizable portion of current Canadian public opinion. "Anti-Americanism" is now fashionable in many quarters in the Dominion. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, for example, has adopted a rather consistently anti-American posture. The New Democratic Party (one of the four more-or-less nationally based parties) is a lusty critic of nearly all things American. Many members of the current Liberal Government (the Prime Minister, Mr. Trudeau, among them) express from time to time hostile attitudes toward the United States.

The growing anti-American sentiment in Canada reflected in this hastily thrown together book is essentially of two types, each proceeding from a different source. The first is a fundamental collision of political ideologies. The Canadian Left—Old and New—attacks the United States as an embodiment of the political and social values they profess to abhor. American ownership of Canadian businesses, U.S. foreign policy, the wickedness of American race relations, the "vulgarizing" of Canadian culture by the importation of American ideas and artifacts are all expressions of this rudimentary ideological quarrel. The rest is an exercise in "devil theory."

The second type of anti-Americanism is somewhat more complex and subtle. It proceeds from the premise that the stature of Canada as an autonomous social entity is enhanced by the deprecation of Canada's richer, larger, more powerful and more culturally dynamic neighbor. The kernel of this line of reasoning—usually subconscious—is that since Canada cannot hope to rival the United States in most of the apparent categories of national merit, she must emphasize her uniqueness, however dubious many of the singularities may be. Largely this superiority is embraced in the concept of Canada as a sort of "Sweden of the New World," gentler, more humane, more morally sensitive, more sympathetic to individual and ethnic diversity and so on. An obvious projection of this myth-building is the wildly exaggerated view, held by many Canadians, of Canada's role in world affairs as a peacemaker, peace-keeper, moral arbiter, and calm sanctuary of moderation and reason. Many Canadians seem strangely miffed if Canada's voice in the councils of the world goes more or less unheeded and those who feel most rebuffed are usually those who advocate the diminution of Canada's already meagre national power.

This concept of happy, rational, progressive, pacifistic, "little" Canada is almost wholly a myth. Canada does enjoy many tangible attributes as a nation-state and as a society, but what often is thought of as sweet moderation is dullness, lethargy, and a taste for the mediocre. The pall of unworldly—or otherworldly—provincialism hangs over Canada like a fog, somewhat, I suppose, like Oklahoma or Arkansas some decades ago. In many areas, such as the evolution of her federal system, Canada is undergoing stresses and strains—"growing pains," if you like—not vastly different from those endured by the United States in the nineteenth century. In some ways, when all is taken into account, Canada is a nineteenth century society. Where else does agrarian populism survive? Or theories of concurrent majority?" Or

serious, if nostalgic, notions of divided sovereignties? Or, for that matter, where else in the so-called "developed" world is there an undeveloped frontier left to tame?

Canada is an immensely "conservative" society in the broadest sense of that word. Its present government, although not conservative in the philosophic sense, is perhaps the farthest right of any government in the West, except Spain, Portugal, and some transient regimes in Latin America. It is a cautious and maddeningly deliberate culture; it is almost the antithesis of a pragmatically progressive society. When an American is confronted with a sound idea, he assumes it can be put into effect and begins to sort out alternative plans of action. When a Canadian is correspondingly presented with an otherwise attractive idea, his tendency is to enumerate the reasons why it could never be actualized.

A part of the anti-American vehemence is an impatience with the rate of cultural growth in Canada. One can genuinely admire much of the passivity of the Canadian

way of life in contrast to the volatility of American society, but it is spurious to reify these Canadian characteristics into a vision of moral superiority or a mythology of Canadian social and political wisdom or some vague assertion of a higher degree of cultural benevolence (as are all suggested in *The New Romans*). The Canadian proclivity for being dull and even boring ought not to be compounded by becoming priggish as well.

The majority of Canadians are (with faults and virtues tallied up) far more intelligent than most of the writers in this volume might lead us to suspect. If they are not, as a people, eminently colorful and creative, they are, on the other hand, unusually decent and stable. The common admiration, across the borders, for decency, stability, and a prudent sense of proportion will not, I am pleased to think, be jeopardized by the publicists of *The New Romans*.

Reviewed by DONALD ATWELL ZOLL



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