

REVIEW: CANADA AND SCOTLAND

Ged Martin

Jenni Calder, **Scots In Canada**, Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2003, 183 pp, pb, £7.99, ISBN 1842820389.

In 2003, the National Museums of Scotland organised an exhibition called 'Trailblazers – the Scots in Canada'. Jenni Calder, a well-kent figure on the Edinburgh cultural scene, was one of the organisers, and **Scots In Canada** is a lively spin-off. It has two great strengths, a love of things Scottish and a feeling for Scots literature, both domestic and diaspora. The result is a historical evocation enriched by the creativity of imagination. (From a fact-grinding historian, this is of course double-edged praise.) The structure of Jenni Calder's book takes us on a journey, which begins with the voyage, then introduces us to the initial Scottish engagement with the land of eastern Canada. A chapter called 'Men Fare Well Enough' moves the story forward through the nineteenth century, portraying the Scots as successful pioneers. (The implied gender comparison in the title is not emphasised.) Then come two chapters on the West. Chapter Six, 'The Right Sort for Canada', doubles back a little to highlight Scots who made an impact in spheres such as politics and railway-building. Chapter Seven, 'True Canadians', probes the fundamental conundrum of national identity. This compact volume also includes illustrations, some well-drawn maps, a bibliography and a list of museums. It is an excellent souvenir volume.

Jenni Calder's fast-moving and consistently upbeat text tends to telescope points so that, no doubt inadvertently, the Scottish role and achievement are exaggerated. Take the passage dealing with the influx of Loyalist refugees

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following the independence of the United States: ‘... the majority of Highland settlers in the [Thirteen] Colonies, along with those Scots who supported the status quo, supported the king. With British defeat, the Loyalists became refugees and most made their way to Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Quebec. There were about 40,000 of them. ... [They were given land.] The Loyalists were a special case; many had not chosen to leave Scotland in the first place, and none had chosen Canada as their destination.’ The resulting impression, that the Loyalists were all Scots, is far from the case. The eighth earl of Elgin, the governor-general who presided over the introduction of responsible government in 1847-8, is credited with having ‘initiated a change of attitude’ towards local autonomy: in fact, he was carrying out orders from a colonial minister in London who, whisper it not, was an Englishman. ‘Lord Elgin’s first task was to bring into being a Canadian parliament, which he did in 1848.’ There had been elected assemblies in Canada since 1791.

A more fundamental problem is the broad net that trawls many disparate people under a single national heading. In fairness, it would take considerable self-denial to write about pioneer life in Ontario without quoting the heart-rending accounts of Susanna Moodie and her sister Catherine Parr Traill. Both were married to Scots, but only a passing reference notes that the two women were born and raised in Suffolk. Many of Scotland’s children did indeed remain faithful to the land of their birth. Accent alone was enough for freshman MP Alexander Mackenzie, later Canada’s second prime minister, to reduce parliament to hysterics when he interjected ‘Who told you I was a Scotchman?’ in response to a member who made an unflattering allusion to his desire for economy. But when we come to the far more notable figure of John A. Macdonald, the founder of the Dominion, national identity is less certain. His family emigrated when he was five. True, he grew up in an emigrant community, with associates such as Mackenzie (from Dingwall), Mowat (locally born) and Campbell (a Yorkshireman). But he was Canadian in accent (even ending his sentences with the quintessential ‘eh?’), and he only once revisited his native land (and then briefly, to buy a kilt in Edinburgh’s George Street). At the age of 60, he joined the Anglican Church. Macdonald remarked that though he had the misfortune to be born in Scotland he had been ‘caught young’ and brought to Canada. True Scots do not parody the jibes of Doctor Johnson.

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If to be Scottish-born but Canadian-reared creates ambiguity in identity, what are we to make of those of Scottish descent? Jenni Calder's ethnic big tent includes the Harvard economist, J.K. Galbraith, whose hilarious memoir of his Ontario childhood has appeared under various titles, such as **The Non-Potable Scotch**. Galbraith was writing of the early twentieth-century rural world of the McPhails, McLeods, Morrisons and McCallums almost a century after emigration. The ethnographer Margaret Bennett has shown that exiled communities sometimes preserved memories and customs that had died out in the homeland itself. But this is not to claim that an entire and exact national identity was preserved in aspic, as even Galbraith's title reveals. 'We referred to ourselves as Scotch and not Scots. When, years later, I learned that the usage in Scotland was different it seemed to me rather an affectation.' So, what qualities had the Ontario 'Scotch' inherited from their homeland? 'His description of these communities demonstrates that their Scottish – or Scotch, the designation he prefers – nature was expressed in much more than names', Jenni Calder remarks. Indeed he does. Galbraith portrayed his neighbours as tight with money, wary of sex, short on personal hygiene – shall I go on? If you like your racism with a smile and a quip, it is all good fun. His Ontario 'Scotch' did not even conform to the benign stereotypes: they were suspicious of education and resistant to innovation.

No surprise, then, that the diaspora did not always like the real thing. Jenni Calder refers to Hugh MacLennan's essay, 'Scotchman's Return', on his 1958 visit, but not to the lesson MacLennan drew from his pilgrimage – that he was a Canadian and not a Scot. Lucy Maud Montgomery, creator of **Anne of Green Gables** (who, surprisingly, does not feature in the book), first saw Edinburgh in her mid-thirties, and was disappointed with Princes Street: 'it isn't the Princes St. of my dreams – the fairy avenue of gardens and statuary and palaces'. The non-potable Scotch were hard to please.

We need to examine the Canada-Scotland link through a different lens. The first Dominion census, in 1871, measured ethnicity through the 'first male ancestor' question. (It was scrapped after 1961, at the behest of kilt-wearing prime minister John Diefenbaker, who valued his maternal Bannerman clan connections and objected to entering himself as a German-Canadian on the strength of a forebear who had arrived in 1803.) In 1871, 15.7 percent of Canadians hyphenated themselves as Scottish. Since Scots counted as 12.9 percent of the population of Great Britain in 1871 and 10.7 percent of the UK total, we would expect them to seem more prominent in Canada. Moreover, with 31.1 percent of Canadians of French descent, the Scottish weighting

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among anglophones represented about double the numerical clout it carried at home.

But the 1871 census had other stories to tell. The English clocked in at 20.3 percent and, remarkably, the Irish registered 24.3 percent. Why don't we associate Canada with the shamrock? The answer, as always, was sectarianism. The Canadian Irish were split, and not just statistically, between Catholic and Protestant. Ethnic diversity gave the Scots an exotic fringe of tartan identifiers, but the importation of ancient feuds undermined the national impact of the Irish. With their English or Ulster-Scots surnames, Protestants conveniently forgot their embarrassing origins over a few generations. By 1961, ten percent of Canadians were still ticking the Scotland box, but barely three percent owned up to bogtrotting and blarney. Even Irish Catholics got in on the act (if they did not head for the more congenial environment of Boston). In Sir Arthur Currie, Canada produced one of the few 1914 War generals who twigged that there was more to trench warfare than rushing at the old barbed wire. Currie's paternal grandfather had shrewdly changed his name from Corrigan. Thus, from running third in the census league, the Scots managed to engross Canada's bicultural partnership as the Auld Alliance writ new.

It suited both Canada and Scotland to assume a special relationship. The standing threat to Canada's distinctiveness came from the United States, a kindred people ten times as numerous living to the south of an open border. Scotland's parallel relationship with England, not to mention its shared quality of gritty 'nordicity' (a Canadian-coined word), made it the ideal analogue. There were also spin-offs in the promotion of Canadian tourism. In Nova Scotia, where about a quarter of the population ticked the Scotland box (i.e. three-quarters did not), the provincial government energetically embraced the tartan from the 1950s, even threatening to station a piper on the New Brunswick border to welcome visitors. Indeed, Canada *was* tartan, and no political rally was complete without its pipers. For Scots, Canada operated as a symbol of benign imperialism. Within the cocoon of the Union of 1707, Scotland was still a nation, the equivalent of France and England and Holland, all of them imperial powers. Scots, it seemed, had been programmed to head for cold countries (a myth not borne out by migration statistics) like Canada and New Zealand's Otago. Cold countries had relatively sparse native populations. The embarrassment that Canada's indigenous people had still been badly treated was brushed aside: at least few had been massacred. So it was that Scotland could claim in Canada not

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merely its own empire, but an exact reproduction of itself, projected on to a majestic canvas. Nobody did more to mythologise this notion than John Buchan. Having turned himself into an Oxford Englishman, he further metamorphosed into Lord Tweedsmuir, became governor-general of Canada and wove all the strands into one romantic Canada-Scotland conflation. Essentially and enjoyably, Jenni Calder celebrates that conflation. Perhaps it is time to interrogate it instead.

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