

Three Stories, Two Visions: The West and the Building of the Canadian Pacific Railway in Canadian Culture

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Plain Truth

Many now think the Canadian nation-state is entering a phase in its development that can be described as “postmodern” (Porter, 1995, pp. 91–106). Throughout the 1990s we have heard much talk of “asymmetrical federalism,” “bilateral federalism,” “successor states” and Quebec/ROC (Rest of Canada) polarities (Watts, 1991, pp. 1–7). In this time of constitutional and political ferment, commentators postulated the existence of as many as “seven incipient nations” within the borders of the present Canadian polity (Mahler and March, 1991, p. 16). There are resonances here within the field of literary criticism. Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond’s *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions* (1990) highlight factors of paradox, contradiction, and extreme irony in the Canadian situation, factors they see as central to the postmodern world view. This paper examines two works of Canadian popular culture analyzed against E. J. Pratt’s *Towards the Last Spike* (1952) in an effort to suggest that a postmodern style may have something to offer our sociopolitical debate. The television dramatization of Pierre Berton’s two-volume work on the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway, *The National Dream* (1974), and the Canada Day Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) special “Murray McLauchlan’s Floating Over Canada” represent, with Pratt, two differing visions of Canada. The McLauchlan effort, I hope to show, when set against Berton and Pratt, represents an implied postmodern critique of modernism’s romantic faith in technological efficiency and cultural tradition. McLauchlan’s anti-intentionalism and playfulness, I argue, offer a useful way to represent some of our present dilemmas and may even provide reasons for optimism about problems that have plagued Canadians for years.

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We need a working definition of postmodernism. Modernism, in Greig Henderson's view, rejoiced in "the solace of good form"—the triumph of artistic statement over the gathering incoherence of the times, represented, perhaps, by the Empire State Building. Postmodernism is more like the National Art Gallery in Ottawa which, it is said, playfully and ingeniously celebrates and juxtaposes ambiguity (Henderson, 1992). If Ernest Hemingway's studied attempt to construct an authentic art form in reaction to Romanticism represents modernism, Tom Wolfe's satirical mocking of the modern hero in *The Right Stuff* can be read as a postmodern exercise in the questioning of all totalizing visions. In its extreme form, postmodernism bothers little with reflecting truth. Postmodernists argue that truth is a manufactured commodity. There are only "truths," yours and mine. At its best, however, postmodernism tries to see the culture for what it is rather than through the lenses of the dominant ideology. In popular culture this often turns into a delight in surface play, a sense of dancing on the edge of things, a light show where surface play is the dominant good. It is MTV versus Ed Sullivan; Saturday Night Live versus Wayne and Shuster.

Linda Hutcheon defines the self-conscious, undercutting style of postmodernism as making a statement while putting inverted commas around it (Hutcheon, 1989, p. 1). Umberto Eco argues that in today's overcommunicated society a lover cannot tell his beloved, "I love you madly." No. The superabundance of cheap images, of the overmodified sentiment that produces an O. J. Simpson trial, necessitates, says Eco, a strategy of ironic rearticulation—"As Barbara Cartland would put it, 'I love you madly'" (Allen, 1987, 1992, p. 333). Linda Hutcheon defines postmodern politics as an approach that "has called into question the messianic faith of modernism, the faith that technical innovation and purity of form can assure social order (Hutcheon, 1990, p. 12). With this comment we come closer to linking postmodernism and the rejection of two constitutional attempts at elite accommodation in the 1990s.

For Linda Hutcheon, postmodern Canadian, the peripheral is central (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 4). She is suspicious of centralizing tendencies and totalizing visions:

Marshall McLuhan once called Canada a 'border line case,' and certainly it is a vast nation with little sense of firm geographical centre or ethnic unity: the multicultural mosaic is no melting pot. In fact, we may be said to have quite a firm suspicion of centralizing tendencies, be they national, political, or cultural. . . . Canada can in some ways be defined as a country whose articulation of its *national* identity has sprung from *regionalist* impulses: the ex-centric forces of Quebec, the maritimes, the west. Its history is one of defining itself against centers.

The postmodern bias for the popular and even the populist represents cultural guerilla war on modernist certitudes. It may help explain the rejection of the Meech Lake and Charlottetown Accords amid a welter of dissonant voices and contradictions (Collins, 1987, 1992, p. 337). The postmodern elasticity in accommodating ex-centric and contending views challenges boundaries. Indeed, Murray McLauchlan's Canada Day special almost epitomizes Toad Gitlin's reading of postmodern politics: "an elbows-out, noisy, jostling, bottom-up version of something that can pass as democracy" (Gitlin, 1989, p. 355).

In Canada, the old order is changing. It is the age of paradox and contradiction. It is the era of the Reform Party and the Bloc Québécois when some seek to "cast the kingdome

old/Into another Mold” (Bush, 1962, p. 346)—an agenda which postmodernists would not see as a total tragedy. In the world’s second-largest country, the peripheral has often been central (Miller, 1987, p. 301). Northrop Frye argued that there is something “vegetable” about a culture, that it draws strongly upon intensely interconnected and localized roots (Frye, 1977, p. 7). In context, postmodern politics asks some pertinent questions:

In whose institutions will faith be restored? In whose interest will such a restoration be? Do these institutions deserve our faith? Can they be changed? Should they be? . . . While the postmodern is . . . fundamentally demystifying and critical . . . among the things of which it is critical are modernism’s elitist and sometimes almost totalitarian modes (Frye, 1977, pp. 16, 26).

When seen through postmodern eyes, E. J. Pratt’s *Towards the Last Spike* highlights some limitations of what was essentially a centralist, totalizing vision of Canada. Pratt is the initiator of the modernist movement in Canadian poetry (Brown, Bennett, and Cook, 1990, p. 205). *Towards the Last Spike* was his final work. It chronicled in elevated and majestic blank verse the achievements of the federal government and the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) in consolidating Canada. Pratt played to a Canadian archetype: the sense of traveling from east to west as emblematic of a spiritual odyssey or a journey of self-discovery. Donald Creighton, Pratt’s colleague at the University of Toronto, described the St. Lawrence River as a “golden funnel” beckoning the earliest explorers on to the riches of the interior. Writer Hugh MacLennan often alluded to the east-west axis of development as a metaphor for the vastness, size, and future spiritual possibilities of Canada (Peepre-Bordessa, 1990, pp. 111–112). And who can forget the actuality drama of Terry Fox and his Marathon of Hope?

From the River to the Lakes to the prairies and on to the Rockies and the shores of the western sea—this rich metanarrative echoes the exploits of explorers Thompson and Hearne, whose journals form the prologue to Canadian literature. True, the Americans faced a similar challenge, but their routes west were diverse and multitracked compared with the Hobson’s choice facing Canadians confronting the north shore of Lake Superior.

There is even subtle linguistic reinforcement here in the names “Upper Canada,” which gave way to “Canada West,” now Ontario, and “the Last, Best West” of the 1890s—Saskatchewan and Alberta. True to type, Pratt’s hero is Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada’s first Prime Minister. He is presented as the totalizing visionary hero clinging to a centralizing imperative (Frye, 1962, p. 351):

Great treks ran through his mind,
East-West against the north-south run of trade,
“From sea to sea,” a hallowed phrase. Music
Was in that text if the right key were
struck . . .

Context matters. Pratt composed his paean to national unity at a time when the “good gray Canada” of the 1950s appeared such a roaring success on the world stage. The 1950s seem, in retrospect, a rare time of consensus when the words “federal” and “federalism” bore a potent mystique. The emergency powers brandished by Ottawa to fight World War

It represented the apex of the modern Canadian nation-state. A federalist surge lay behind the era of C. D. Howe and “can-do” capitalism. This was the cultural matrix of *Towards the Last Spike*. In 1949, even Pratt’s home province of Newfoundland had been assimilated into the surging confederation. The totalizing vision was in the ascendant, as Pratt wrote. Historians commented (Finlay and Sprague, 1989, p. 369):

Canadians emerged from the Second World War imagining that they had become “a power in the world.” In the Great War they were told that they had acquired the spirit of a nation; by 1945 they were congratulated for having gained international stature. A country with a relatively small population had emerged in the number three position by industrial production and in number four by the strength of its armed forces.

The 1950s were a rare Canadian epiphany. There was an air of “smug satisfaction” in English Canada (Finlay and Sprague, 1989, p. 376). Quebec stirred only fitfully under the last, long sleep of Duplessis, and the West was quiet. The threat—if any—was from Washington, not Ottawa (Frye, 1962, p. 366).

That westward trek was the American,
Union-Pacific—easy so he thought,
Their forty million stacked against his four.
Lonely and desolate this.

Two Newfoundland scholars, while admitting Pratt’s stature as the province’s greatest poet, take him to task for his “Canadian and imperial poetry” (O’Flaherty, 1979, p. 126). This piercing dart appears well aimed. The Pratt of *Towards the Last Spike* was an arch-federalist, a man of his times. The federal way, the centralist way is the Canadian way, marked out in the very stars MacDonald searches out through his telescope at night (Frye, 1962, pp. 349–350):

Under Polaris was the Arctic Sea
And the sub-Arctic gates well-stocked with names:
Hudson, Davis, Baffin, Frobisher;
And in his own day Franklin, Ross and Parry
Of the Canadian Archipelago. . . .

Pratt, like Creighton, reflected the ethos of the “TOM triangle”—the Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal axis. Pratt’s heartland-hinterland ideology clothed itself—and still does at constitutional conferences—in rhetoric that strains to become corporeal (Frye, 1962, p. 351):

A Western version of the Arctic daring,
Romance and realism, double dose.

In 1952, the Quiet Revolution, the October Crisis of 1970, the rise of the Parti Québécois, the Referendums, the Reform Party, Meech Lake and Oka—these were not even clouds on the horizon. Yet, in 1957, in a celebrated response to *Towards the Last Spike*, Canadian poet F. R. Scott asked, “Where are the coolies in your poem, Ned?” He was referring to the brutal conditions endured by some 6,000 Chinese laborers working on

the CPR. In the same vein, it is lamentable that no attempt to exorcise the trauma of the Second Conscript Crisis of 1944 figures into Pratt's vision. Nor might francophone readers take kindly to Pratt's evocation of Sir John A.'s wooing of British Columbia (Frye, 1962, p. 352):

Her name
 Was rich in values—*British*; this alone
 Could raise Macdonald's temperatures; so could
Columbia with a different kind of fever,
 And in between the two, *Victoria*.

While few ever get to transcend their time, and while Pratt has left us a rich lode of nationalist mythology, *Towards the Last Spike* outlines a conventional, centralized, modernist vision. He ignores Quebec, misses the human social drama of the settling of the prairies, and skips over the Indian and Metis rebellions. Even superb blank verse could not carry the freight of the submerged alienation and cultural estrangement that has marred the telling of our tales. Would another generation do better?

The next major attempt to tell the tale of the great railway—and by extension, the Canadian West—came in 1974, on prime-time television. “As long as I live never will a damned American company have control of the Canadian Pacific.” The speaker was George Cartier, or at least the CBC's version of Macdonald's francophone lieutenant, as he appeared on the eight-week television series *The National Dream* which debuted in 1974 (CBC, 1974). The series—based on Pierre Berton's best-selling history—was produced by James Murray, directed by Eric Till and James Murray, with scripts by Timothy Findley and William Whitehead. At times, *The National Dream* took such obvious frontal swipes at perceived American threats to the Canadian West that it makes sense only as a tract of the times, as a product of the cultural nationalism of Expo '67 and a project incarnated in the mandating of “Canadian content” regulations in 1968.

Episode Four epitomizes the series. It gives us William Hutt's superb portrayal of Sir John A. Macdonald, cultural nationalist. Findley and the writers have caught the Churchillian temper of the Prime Minister's impassioned plea in the House of Commons for a “rich and improving Canada instead of being a tributary to *American* tolls and *American* rates, to all the little tricks and big tricks that *American* railroads are addicted to for the purpose of destroying our roads.”

The National Dream is acted and directed very well. “On-location” shots at the Governor-General's mansion and Pierre Berton's lively narration in front of such evocative backdrops as the Parliamentary Library in Ottawa drive home the theme of rampant federalism. To hear Hutt declaiming as Macdonald or to watch Gerard Parkes as the relentless and implacable Edward Blake is to enjoy some of the most underappreciated moments in Canadian prime-time drama. Indeed, the series strains too hard to be realistic. The eight episodes could have been profitably condensed. There are far too many tedious closeups of elderly and bewhiskered Victorian bureaucrats and business magnates, unrelieved by a lively feminine presence. Worse, for our study, there was little attempt to exploit even more the truly national dream by including important material from the periphery, material readily at hand in our history. Some explanation of the complexities of the Riel Rebellion and how it affected opinion in Quebec might have been interesting

to the less-polarized audiences of 1974. To probe the roots of *indépendantiste* feeling and its historic roots might have contributed to a national dialogue of understanding in a time of relative stability. Instead we are exposed to the repetition of dimly lit scenes in Victorian mansions chronicling the minutiae of the Pacific Scandal.

Worse, the dramatic potential of Crowfoot, the chief of the Blackfoot, a pivotal figure in the settling of the West, could have been exploited in flashback fashion. Instead he rates a bare 30-second appearance in episode 5. The irony here is that Crowfoot is introduced by the narrative voice of authority as a chief “known for his eloquence.” He says nothing in the minisegment allotted to him. The complexities of the settlement of the West are dismissed by a voice-over that concludes: “So the Lieutenant-Governor himself arrived to give the Indians extra land in return for the CPR right of way.” The offhand and embarrassing remark of Van Horne’s secretary on the Indian problem (“I told my men to shoot them”) is illustrative of the failure of this series to break out of the confining straitjacket of the heartland/hinterland orientation so many in the regions deplore. The Metis and the entire Northwest Rebellion are rushed over with almost unseemly haste. We are shown brief vignettes of blood on snow.

Most telling, though, in the light of the Western alienation and resentment that were simmering in the prairies and which would erupt in fury after the unveiling of the National Energy Policy of 1980, are *The National Dream’s* unflattering portrayals of prairie life. Seemingly frozen forever in faded Victorian photographs, they are dismissed as “strange, struggling” communities. We hear of Winnipeg’s “real-estate madness”; Regina’s founding on a “wretched piece of prairie land” and Brandon being treated as an aberration depending on the whim of Major Rosser and an unresponsive Manitoba farmer.

Colorful narration? Yes. Condescending? Perhaps. These depictions may explain how these communities began, but to feed and reinforce these stereotypes on prime time at a time when the West was becoming arguably the most vibrant part of the national economy was a cultural miscalculation.

The National Dream is far from being an unrelieved tale of metropolis/hinterland stereotyping, however. There are elegiac moments where Berton, the host-narrator, intones his own eloquent prose to stunning effect, providing us with moments both aesthetic and honest:

Here on the prairies people would curse the railway, sometimes they’d bless it but most of all, they’d depend on it. Men would set their watches by its train whistles and couples awakened by the passing of moonlight cars would conceive their children to the sound of wheels on steel. The CPR would affect the lives of almost every Canadian.

In such rare moments Berton played well to the peripheral that is central. He himself is one of the strong pluses in *The National Dream*. How easy for him to have stood on the Bow River bridge leading to downtown Calgary or to tape a scene in front of the impressive Regina legislature building in Wascana Park to detail what had become of those “strange, struggling” communities in later years. Such tactics might well have enriched the series as a cultural unifier, a prime-time testament to a Canadian “community of communities” from sea to sea, saddled with but struggling against all the burdens and unresolved questions that still bedevil us. The lens could quite profitably have widened beyond the parade of solemn and slightly dyspeptic Scots—Stephen, Smith, Fleming,

Macdonald, Mackenzie, Rogers—and too many “brooding presence” scenes of the landscape. We could have been offered, in other words, a much larger canvas, one that might have eased the “devaluing or ignoring of the ‘marginalized challenges of the ex-centric, those related to the fringes of the dominant culture.’”

The National Dream missed a great opportunity to touch on Canada’s Other Solitudes. The story could quite possibly be profitably retold in all its cultural depth and richness. The saga of the CPR is still a tale pregnant with possibilities for reflecting back to us a lot about ourselves and our dilemmas as a people *if* the periphery is appreciated as more central. Even the “brooding landscape” scenes that tried to capture the primeval and somewhat intimidating Canadian wilderness worked best when fused with the human response. The surveyor Robert Rylatt’s voice-over describing the jungle that is the British Columbia interior works well. He describes “peaks almost lost in the blue of the sky, their bases buried in gloom, their sides rent and worn by nature’s convulsions, and their mad streams ever leaping in foam and tumult from their snowy starting point; forming barriers in the way of puny man as he threads his way through the chaos of lower levels amid difficulty and danger.”

In *The National Dream* the terrain is not always linked in such a meaningful way. Its most dramatic moments are Hutt playing Macdonald in the House of Commons, a Prime Minister speaking to the cultural nationalist moment in 1974 as well as the 1880s. Let us build the line, he says, lest

. . . the colonies [be] gradually severed from one another and become a bundle of sticks as they were before with no binding cord and then we should fall, helpless, powerless, aimless into the hands of the neighboring republic. . . . No, Mr. Speaker, I will not have it . . . the road is going to be built and proceeded with vigorously, continuously, systematically and successfully to a completion and . . . the fate of Canada as a Dominion then will be sealed.

These moments of television theater are too rare. The gauge of *The National Dream*, like *Towards the Last Spike*, is too narrow. There are coolies on prime time in 1974 but, tellingly, Indians and the Metis and their sensitivities are never addressed, and the prairie provinces seem stereotyped and frozen in time. Another decade would have to be halfway finished before the land and the people would be linked in a new paradigm reflecting a new period style. It occurred on Canadian prime-time television on Canada Day, 1985.

Murray McLauchlan’s *Floating over Canada*, while hardly a major artistic production conceived to speak to the Canadian experience for all time—its own creators would eschew any such pretension—is nevertheless important as depicting a more flexible, unbounded vision of the country. Though it has stereotypical moments where it stumbles badly, Mary Jane Miller’s modest tribute is close to the mark (Miller, 1987, p. 301):

Murray McLauchlan’s CBC music special, *Floating Over Canada* (1/7/85, rebroadcast 1/7/86) provided us with an image which is more like ourselves. *Floating over Canada* is a celebration of our landscape, our people and our music, using a bush plane with floats as its narrative link, thematic motif and overview. That is one of the things we are—many disparate voices scattered over several thousand miles, talking and singing in several languages, a cowboy and a chanteuse tied together by a float plane, a camera, a singer-narrator, and the CBC.

Floating over Canada has the excessive self-parody and undercutting self-reflexivity that stamps it as a postmodern artifact. McLauchlan, one of Canada's premier working-class troubadours in the folk-rock idiom, is out to have fun, and have fun he does. From the bemused irony of the opening scene in which he emerges from a manhole cover in an eastern city to the climactic kissing of a codfish on a Newfoundland dock, this is a festival of ironical semidetachment, a study in inverted commas. McLauchlan's blue-collar high jinks help create a sense of the bearable lightness of Canada, of Canadians in more ordinary and natural moods. His opening lyrics are suggestive and designed to prepare us for a journey to the periphery, a periphery which is also central (CBC, 1985):

Blast-steel towns they huddle down by the U.S. border signs,
That's the heart of the country.
But the soul is out past the timber line . . .

This point is reemphasized in the show's theme song, a parodic play on the national anthem set in a quiet, insistent beat:

O Canada, I would'a never believed you got in my heart after all,
You seem like such an endless place in a world that's gettin' small.
No Canada, ain't no Cabinet Man at the Rideau Club at election time,
Canada is somewhere out there,
Canada is somewhere out there,
Canada is somewhere out there,
Out back behind the timber line.

McLauchlan's purpose is to show us that Canada behind the timber line, the land of Rudy Wiebe, Farley Mowat, and Margaret Atwood. McLauchlan flies us across the country in a float plane, dropping in on such representative—perhaps too representative at times—artists as Buffy Ste. Marie, Ian Tyson, Gordon Lightfoot, Sylvie Tremblay, and Edith Butler. What is notable, however, and what sets this in a postmodern mode are the *reversed polarities*: McLauchlan starts in the Arctic, drops in on the Inuit and the Blood Indians, and then sweeps across Canada from British Columbia to Newfoundland. The big cities and even the national capital on this Canada Day special are completely bypassed. The peripheral is central.

With the help of his "lighter-than-air" craft, McLauchlan inverts the stereotypes while constructing a pastiche of a blue-collar worker interacting with the Native, the farmer, the rancher, the oil-driller and the dance hall girl. We are reminded of the 14% of Canadians who describe themselves as "working class"—perhaps, by now, another solitude.

The float plane's trip north images the Icarus-like ability to conceptualize Canada in soft focus. The visuals of stark, subarctic granite and the silent lakes recall the words of Pratt's nemesis, F. R. Scott (Brown, Bennett, and Cooke, 1990, p. 276):

This land stares at the sun in a huge silence
Endlessly repeating something we cannot hear.
Inarticulate, arctic,
Not written on by history, empty as paper,
It leans away from the world with songs in its lakes
Older than love, and lost in the miles.

There is a problem here, of course. It is what to do with the 76% of Canadians who live in urban centers. Where do they fit in this celebration of the land and the people? Is it not just as stereotypical and shallow to focus on the hinterland when there are in fact more Jamaicans now living in Canada than Inuit (Grenville, 1992)? There are no easy answers here, but it is not an exaggeration to say that nordicity and the penetrating responses to spectacular but sometimes hostile landscape from a wide variety of cultures and angles—this too has been seen as essential to the Canadian literary imagination. Marie Peepre-Bordessa reminds us of the seemingly simple point that “the character of a people reflects the setting they live in” (Peepre-Bordessa, 1990, p. 40). The bitterness of a Canadian winter can still conjure up emotional resonances of a “true North strong and free,” a wistful myth that is perhaps not all myth—at least not in a snowstorm.

McLaughlan’s float plane cruising the high North evokes Hugh MacLennan’s sense of a country “where nobody is able to change the landscape.” *Floating over Canada* confirms his point that Canadians “living with the shifting immutability of the ocean and the unshifting immutability of granite rocks . . . must take life and the world as [they find] them” (Peepre-Bordessa, 1990, p. 40). Insightful writers have described a Canadian “land ethic” (Bentley, 1990, p. vi), Tom Thompson’s “environmental vision” (Murray, 1991, pp. 5–51), or even a “tory conservatism” (Bentley, 1990, p. xviii). McLaughlan, met by an Inuit maiden in a kayak, reflects the muted awe that living in the solitary reaches can stir in us. He asks in song: “Is anybody home out in the universe?”

Buffy Ste. Marie’s insistent repetition of such words as “Starwalker,” “Wolfrider,” and “Lightning Woman” to the pounding of traditional Indian drums captures this otherworldly mysticism. The land works its wonder at an almost subliminal level, a land very much as it was when it first came from God’s own hand. Slow freeze-frame visuals of Indian braves and women riding horses come next. They help link the landscape with Canada’s *human* past just as the eternal but eerily beautiful white granite shots had transported us into the *geologic* past. This is a strange but spiritual beginning for a Canada Day video. It allows for incorporation of elements quite often marginalized—the infinite, the primal, the half-forgotten. It is a response to the Canadian landscape that recurs in our literature and in our history, and it is essentially a message of reassurance: *the land is doing fine even if the nation-state is in trouble.*

McLaughlan’s next stop, with loggers on Georgia Strait, is more posed and stereotypical. He tells us in a song sprinkled amid playful images of logrolling that you can “take your 9 to 5, take your suit and ties/You can marry the boss’ daughter” but that the life that really counts is “the life on the Georgia Strait water.” As we fly out to Alberta via float plane over the Kicking Horse Pass the tone is light and playful, unlike the sometimes mordant gloom reflected too much in *The National Dream*. The landscape is celebrated even as it is transcended by the fragile, unimperial craft of a tiny float plane. Once we drop off at Ian Tyson’s ranch in Alberta, the peripheral feels itself central with emphasis:

Singer please help me shatter this old tune;
Toronto may be Rhythm and Blues
But if you migrate here
You’ll be looking at that old Alberta moon.

Yet Tyson has played the outsider so long that he seems to be parodying himself. It is too much a set piece: working cattle in the corral, camping out, sleeping in a cave as a wolf

howls. Next comes a "prairie Gothic" sequence about the desperate dreams and fantasies of people in a roadside tavern. This has more gritty authenticity but ruined by a very forgettable musical score. Things are only slightly redeemed by McLauchlan's next effort, singing "The Farmer's Song" to a real Saskatchewan farmer on a harrower. The working-class troubadour and the real-life farmer make a fine quixotic juxtaposition. We are invited to reflect upon the good nature of farm folk who do not mind being part of this piece of highly stage-managed pastiche. Canadian super-agreeableness is here in spades!

The plane turns inexorably east to Ontario but to ex-centric northern Ontario, Group of Seven country, Gordon Lightfoot country. Lightfoot meets the float plane in a canoe whose prow gently curves limpid ripples in the gently yielding water. Lightfoot sings about a rural boy giving up big-city life for his girl. There is some fetching camera work here as the float plane makes effective pans over the Algoma-like countryside at interesting 45° angles. The seagulls, the sun on the lake, the cry of the loon—this is close to the Canada of the imagination, the land beyond the timberline. We linger lovingly along the periphery. Fittingly, the whole Lightfoot sequence is set on the edge of a lake. The boundaries are indistinct. It is the spiritual that comes into play, the too often excluded, the soul of the country, all emphasized by skillful camera work showing a montage of canoes in the mist.

Nordicity, that essential component on everyone's list of Canadiana, has been given its due. McLauchlan sings a railroad song as he drives a train on the Algoma line with plenty of grins at the camera to let us know he's having fun: the working class troubadour playing the working-class troubadour. Far away are the Canada Day crowds and "cabinet men from the Rideau Club." Thus we press on to Quebec, "the other part of our dual identity," a not very helpful remark but one that fits McLauchlan's occasional descents into staged bumptiousness. Sylvie Tremblay appears in a dream sequence game of mirrors, doors, and stairs. There is plenty of sexual innuendo and the song "Passage dans la Vie" is tuneful and well done. Tremblay plays the dance hall girl playing hard to get. Her cool, ironic hauteur toward this vagabond who has dropped in on his float plane is more a moment in the politics of sexual eversion than a political metaphor for Quebec. This is entertaining but not great television.

McLauchlan moves into New Brunswick. Levon Helm and The Band join him in a musical enactment of the Acadian struggles and celebrations. Here we see again the ex-centric style in posed parody. It is almost an MTV clip. Yet McLauchlan's ability to juxtapose music and history in this scene is a good example of what Linda Hutcheon describes as the ability of the postmodern to "speak to a culture from inside it." The postmodern sensibility believes this "to be the only way to reach that culture and make it question its values and its self-constructing representations" (Hutcheon, 1990, p. 13). Postmodern politics in soft focus can sometimes offer a more holistic and less offensive way to make a point than the didactic, sequential imperatives of technological modernism.

As the singers reenact the expulsion, hunting down and wanderings of the Acadians, Helm sings his haunting and energetic ballad in the modern folk idiom. His thin, reedy voice evokes melancholia and nostalgia as visuals tell the story. It is a powerful blend of music, montage, and historical reflection—a subtle and powerful way to question some of the contradictions too many "cabinet men from the Rideau Club" will not remind their audiences about on Canada Day. The lyrics and the music blend well in perhaps the most satisfying piece in the show:

Acadian driftwood, gypsy tailwind
 They called my home the land of snow,
 Canadian cold front movin' in
 What a way to ride, ho, what a way to go.

The Acadians give as good as they get in this imaginative inversion of history. Yet they still run to the boats for a getaway. The lyrics tell the story:

. . . heading for St. Pierre
 Nothing to declare, all we had was gone.
 Broke down along the coast, oh, but what hurt the most,
 Was the people said, "Oh, you better keep movin' on."

The excluded, the marginalized, the unsettled have been moved to center stage. But wait! Who is this in an Acadian costume? Why, it is McLauchlan himself, our host-troubadour from the float plane. He is skillfully juxtaposed with "Acadians" who are actors in mock-serious mood. This makes a fine postmodern moment. It highlights the ability to make subtle linkages and statements that a more formal and rule-bounded genre might appear ridiculous at even attempting. The actors look like children playing at games. Yet all the while a serious episode in our history is being recalled. Postmodern parody as mandate work? Possibly. But in this and other sequences we are reminded of the spiritual integrity of the land beyond the timberline and of many of the ordinary people who live their quietly rewarding lives, now and back then. For in *Floating over Canada* the peripheral is emphatically central. The style is ironic, self-parodying, self-conscious. It undercuts itself again and again, but it works. It throws up significant statements. It is a postmodern question McLauchlan and Helm are posing: Which "facts" make it into history? And whose facts?

Thus the postmodern style, behind its mask of comedic play, beyond the absurdity of inserting a denim-clad hero from a float plane into a historical parody, gently raises the still-unanswered questions about the kind of country we want to become. If the politics of postmodernism involves speaking to a culture from inside that culture and yet simultaneously questioning the values of that culture in soft focus, we have a clear example in *Floating over Canada*. Amid the rhetoric and perplexity of our times we might be better served at this point in our history by programs that could reach the mass audience by utilizing some of these skillful subtleties in essentially gentle and questioning ways.

Floating over Canada, with its juxtapositioning of celebrification and criticism, its bias to the peripheral and the excluded, is rooted in an appreciation for a landscape that represents a Canadian constant. It has a point to make even in its moods of self-parody. As Canadians set about the task of living together in a new century, a new millennium, they will need all the help they can get to tackle the challenges of our multiple solitudes. Postmodernism has the potential to help, not hinder, that agenda.

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