Robin Mathews

Review Article

Culture in Whose Interest?

Telecommunications in Canada. By Robert E. Babe. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1990. Pp. xv, 363. $50.00. Paper, $24.95.

When Television Was Young: Primetime Canada 1952-1967. By Paul Rutherford. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1990. Pp. xv, 637. $65.00. Paper, $24.95.

Making Culture: English-Canadian Institutions and the Arts before the Massey Commission. By Maria Tippett. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1990. Pp. xii, 253. $40.00. Paper, $17.95.

These books, histories, all engage aspects of what might broadly be called "Canadian culture." Maria Tippett is concerned mostly with the subject as refined and decorative activity between 1900 and 1957 (the founding of the Canada Council). Paul Rutherford confines his study to television in the black and white years, 1952-1967. Robert E. Babe undertakes "an analytical history of telecommunications in Canada" from at least the early nineteenth century to our day.

Comparisons among the books, then, are relevant only on the level of methodology. On that level comment is almost inescapable because the flawed and cranky methodologies in two of the works force the reader to ask both what "culture" is and, indeed, what a "history" is or ought to be.

Maria Tippett, a liberal historian, writes *Making Culture* only about English Canada; and the book is limited somewhat more by the fact that the phrase in the title "before the Massey Commission" really means from about 1900. That makes a problem since one of the chief stated purposes is to reveal pre-Canada Council "breadth, depth, and

character of cultural activity in Canada." An important unstated thesis is that a "sustained, well-funded, and comprehensive program for the arts" was always required in Canada and the foundation of the Canada Council brought that condition, finally, into being.

One would expect Maria Tippett to define precisely what she means by "culture" and tell us why its history in Canada is important to us. She doesn't. What she provides, moreover, is an often kaleidoscopic, tireless (though not complete) survey of the fine arts (mostly). The flurry of facts—not directly connected to the development of a shaping thesis—conveys a sense of thinness sometimes. Her narrow focus permits her scanty reference, for instance, to CBC radio and none to TV. Tippett does nod at CBC radio as patron and transmitter but only to remark that "all this activity could be no real substitute" for the sustained, well-funded, and comprehensive program she is looking for. Distressingly often, moreover, judgments, assumptions, and analyses present colonial-minded conventional wisdom, not vital, new insights into the growth of English Canadian culture.

She lets personal distempers intrude damagingly, communicating an arch and ahistorical dislike of British governors general, for instance, as well as surprise and distaste at the utterly obvious fact that they should be anglocentric in their cultural tendencies. She questions their motives and expresses surprise that their hierarchical place and social role should have been what they so obviously were. And so we are treated to *insights* such as this one:

> Notwithstanding their frequently obvious predilection for the British and the imperial, the governors general got a wide measure of support among members of English Canada's cultural community, many of whom, anxious to have the recognition of persons generally considered to be of taste and cultivation, sought viceregal attention in a quite vigorous way.

Embarrassingly, she faults arts organizers and especially governors general in the early part of the century for not possessing a 1990s multicultural view. Indeed, she lists John Buchan's (Lord Tweedsmuir's) visible support of Canadian cultural activity at length, only to end by deciding that "his interests were elsewhere than in fostering a uniquely Canadian cultural life. . . ." Why? Because he spoke to the Association of Canadian Bookmen in 1936 about "the importance of uplifting and improving immigrants who did not have 'much of a literary education behind them, and in whom the reading habit will have to be carefully fostered.' "

Her distaste for imperial influence does not lead her to special insight about Canadian effort and production or to a fresh appreciation of them. She derides the Group of Seven, for example, because of its "regional character and derivative style," listing a number of reasons why it appealed to tastemakers of the day without anywhere suggesting that excellence of quality might have been a contributing factor.

Making Culture is a cranky book. It even attacks the Masseys, describing Vincent as a man deeply involved with Canadian artistic life and a benefactor of genuine depth and cultivation. But he was, for Tippett, a failure. She makes the strange claim that much of what he tried to do "failed to strike deep roots in the country . . . and . . . had little success in resisting the tide of mass culture. . . ." (Didn't the Massey Commission prepare the way for the Canada Council which Tippett admits revolutionized and legitimized artistic activity?)

Tippett's book makes one suspect that "liberal history" invites anti-intellectual approaches, eccentric readings of events, and fragmentary analyses of cause and effect. Liberal history, we know, sanctifies the present and appears to champion "the people" against "elites" even while accepting liberal capitalist democracy as the theatre in which events happen rather than the centre of power formations which create and legitimize events peculiar to its ideology. Liberal history tends to be ahistorical and, unless it is kept carefully in check, permits the concern of the moment to be the basis upon which to judge past people who possessed quite other structures of value than the eager, faddishly moralizing historian of the moment.

Though more complete—sometimes exhaustingly so—Paul Rutherford's very large liberal history, *When Television Was Young: Prime-time Canada 1952-1967*, contains similar eccentricities and biases. It is fundamentally, annoyingly, even astonishingly, a philistine history. Rutherford reports late in the book that "ratings data demonstrated time and again that most viewers were almost always in search of relaxation and diversion." For him, relaxation and diversion signify the least common denominators of intelligence and critical consciousness. A little later he questions the validity of polling, but in the quoted passage he uses polling results to express what is a major basis of his book. It takes position with commercial interests, the viewers of junk television, and sanctification of the present structure of TV power.

That's a strong claim, but Rutherford very early presents an illuminating and persistent opposition of forces. He sets up as whipping boy and fool in the struggle for TV the "highbrow" (whom he defines as "a

person of superior taste in cultural products, namely someone devoted to elite or high culture rather than to mass culture"). Mass culture is what "the people" are said to want, and it is (falsely) usually seen as unintelligent garbage. Almost anything other than unintelligent garbage is the province of the "highbrow" for Rutherford.

He gives evidence, however, that Canadians enjoyed Canadian fare of professionalism and quality right across the spectrum. But he deals inadequately with the reasons they didn't get enough of it. To do so would have required him to deal pretty thoroughly with CBC underfunding, private interest irresponsibility, political betrayal, anti-CBC policies on the part of those who owned the press in Canada, and the anti-Canadian ideology of major lobby groups, as well as a careful analysis of *the reasons* polls and ratings data shaped as they did. But that would have forced a very different book than what we have here.

The "highbrows" are "apologists of Culture," "champions of Culture," "the country's intelligentsia," "the ivory tower." A highbrow is the kind of person who might join with one of the other fools of the age, "a nationalist or a moralist," to "decry Hollywood's invasion." When Miriam Waddington, for instance, quite reasonably questioned the sameness of variety shows, she was for Paul Rutherford "the sophisticate and the snob." Vincent Massey (increasingly the hate-icon for supporters of commercialized, privatized, garbage culture) is "that sophisticate." Rutherford doesn't sympathize, he says frankly at the start, "by and large with the typical views of highbrows or cultural nationalists, then or now, about the baneful influences of TV." Yet 470 pages later he reports that television "could and did dull the senses"; did "encourage violence"; "contributed to racism about natives, patriarchy as norm, consumerism"; it engaged in "creating an illusion . . . (the) mythologizing of life"; and it was controlled by "interests."

That is not just an eccentric contradiction. It reveals a pernicious mindset that refuses to consider seriously the implications of the power and effect of unmodified profit incentives or the tireless activity by private interests (in John A. Irving's 1957 words *not quoted* in *Primetime*) "to shake the CBC down entirely and abolish it." So Rutherford can conclude on the last page with the master statement of privatization doubletalk: "Nobody really controls television because so many people share influence over television."

The enemies in the battle for TV, for him, are the highbrow, the moralist, the nationalist, protectionism, the elitist cast of mind, voluntary organizations—everyone, indeed, who usually turns up as enemy of profit-driven, irresponsible private interests in the media. When, for

instance, significant public groups, at one point, wanted the Board of Broadcast Governors to be more representative of Canadians, they were according to Rutherford "engaging in a strategy of capture." Those forces have "particular causes"; they engage "in a strategy of capture." They "whine," take on airs, think "themselves better than most people"; and they involve themselves in "special pleading."

Such terms and concepts are intended for derisory sloganeering, obviously. If they were not, Rutherford would balance them with their opposites: the lowbrows, the immoral interests, the anti-nationalists, the sell-outs, the vulgarian cast of mind, the lout, corporate lobby organizations. The forces represented by those words and phrases would have class interests, would attempt veiled monopoly, would bludgeon and coerce, would lie about their "ordinary" Canadian position.

Such expressions are almost absent because Rutherford isn't writing a history but an argument (masked as a championing of the people and its freedom to choose) for private corporate hegemony in TV. That may explain three things: the apparent in-depth "textual" analysis of production that is embarrassingly thin gruel, the scattergun approach to major structural forces, and the general acceptance of polling results as explaining why television developed as it did.

Thankfully, Robert E. Babe's book *Telecommunications in Canada* attempts something methodologically very different than Tippett or Rutherford. The book satisfies the claim to provide "Canada's first comprehensive, integrated treatment of the emergence and development of key communication sectors: telegraph, telephones, cable TV, broadcasting, communication satellites, and electronic publishing." Babe attempts to overcome myth, ahistorical comment, eccentric and biased readings of events, as well as personalist conclusions about cause and effect. Indeed, he takes as his guiding principle Roland Barthes's insistence that the non-historical approaches rob study of "all soiling trace of origin or choice." Babe seeks to restore an understanding of development by means of a disciplined and demystifying approach.

By no means a Marxist, Babe uses what he calls pattern recognition (from Marshall McLuhan), longtime observation of media structures, the character of corporate interest in Canadian media, and close study of five major media myths to disclose real power interests, real centres of decision making, and the real motivations for the structures that have developed in all forms of technological communication in Canada. He traces telecommunications in Canada from the beginning,

revealing fundamental questions and providing facts about efficiency, regulation, monopoly, predatory pricing, vertical integration, all forms of accounting, and so-called natural monopoly. He invites us to see as a major purpose of the book the need "to consider communications devices in the real world of power struggle and powerplay."

The book will become, as the blurb alleges, "the definitive work on Canadian telecommunications for years to come." It leaves out a lot, but points to the need for investigation. His remarks about vertical integration, for instance, suggest wide areas of research into massive disguised profit-making. He nowhere mentions B.C. Government Telephones. But a researcher looking into it and other government telephone operations in Canada might find information to argue that hinterland service was often opened with taxpayers' money and then sold (given?) to private companies when profit became possible. Such a study would require a fuller examination of the degree to which governments and regulation agencies saw/and see themselves as servants of private corporate power.

Professor Babe often uses an impersonal style and the passive voice, both of which weaken his presentation. As an extension of that weakness, he falls into the imprecise language of conventional wisdom. The main "dialectic," he tells us, since the creation of the Board of Broadcast Governors, has "concerned the proportional strengths of the public and the private sectors; the relative emphasis to be afforded ideals and profits; and Canadian nationalism vs. international information flows." The language is unfortunate, to say the least.

The logic of the statement is that private broadcasters and public broadcasters must have (dialectically) opposed values, that ideals and profits are (dialectical) opposites. People involved in ideas of "nationalism" must see a (dialectical) opposite in "international information flows," and vice versa. Fortunately, Robert Babe doesn't fall into such error very often, though his style is rarely as good as his basic thesis and argument.

Finally, the book as a whole doesn't share the vigor and focus of the introduction and conclusion. Babe writes as if he wants to call a group of pirates the pirates they are and have been, but still wants to be able to join them for pleasant conversation at the Rideau Club.

No matter. For anyone wanting a valuable springboard to an understanding of the realities of telecommunications in Canada this book is excellent. All MLAs, MNAs and MPs should be locked in rooms with the book until they can achieve 75% in a tough examination based on its information. When they have passed the requirement, they

should—as a prize—be excused any obligation to read either *Making Culture* or *Primetime Canada.*