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LRC design concept by Jackie Young/INK

FONDED IN 1991 BY P.A. DUTIL

The LRC is published 10 times a year by the Literary Review of Canada Inc.

ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION RATES

Individuals in Canada $59/year. (Libraries and institutions in Canada $72/year.) Canadian prices include GST/HST. Outside Canada, please add $10/year to prices above if paying in U.S. funds, or $30/year if paying in Canadian funds, for extra postage.

SUBSCRIPTIONS AND CIRCULATION

Library Review of Canada
P.O. Box 6, Station K Toronto ON M4P 2G1
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tel: 416-502-1061 • review@lrcreview.com

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The Literary Review of Canada is indexed in the Canadian Literature Periodicals Index and the Canadian Index and is distributed by Dietscio and Magazines Canada.

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Publications Assistance Program and the Canada Magazine Fund of the Department of Canadian Heritage toward our mailing and editorial costs.

FUNDING ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge the assistance of the OMDC Magazine Fund, an initiative of Ontario Media Development Corporation.

Ontario Arts Council Conseil des Arts de l’Ontario
Ontario, Government of Ontario

Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport
Is It All Quebec’s Fault?

A Maritimes-based polemicist ends up sounding like a western separatist.

LARS OSBERG

Fearful Symmetry: The Fall and Rise of Canada’s Founding Values
Brian Lee Crowley
Key Porter Books
355 pages, softcover

It is remarkable that a book that is ostensibly about changing Canadian values presents no survey data whatsoever to support Crowley’s many large assertions.

available study of the relative size of government in Canada and the United States concludes, for example, that “real government spending related to real aggregate income as of 2003 was virtually the same in the two countries, at about 27 percent of real GDP.” However, none of that is allowed to intrude on the narrative. And the historic fact that Canada’s surge of social policy activism in the 1960s and early ‘70s (when medicare, the Canadian and Quebec pension plans, unemployment insurance and the Canada Assistance Plan were passed) was the price the Liberal minority governments of the day paid for NDP support likewise does not fit neatly into the storyline and is therefore ignored totally.

Readers who like facts will be distressed by Crowley’s eclectic mix of sources (for example, an unknown civil servant’s opinion on the percentage of federal government spending that is wasteful), and because his assertions are, at important points, wildly wrong (such as regarding the government’s impact on the income share of the bottom 40 percent). Those who like consistency of argument will find themselves baffled—wondering why, for example, Crowley advocates opening immigration to “any potential immigrant who can get a formal job offer from a Canadian employer” after concluding two pages earlier that greater immigration has negligible benefits for per capita income growth. And parts of the book are just loopy—the argument that “the desire of its citizens to make more little citizens to populate its future is a measure of a society’s happiness” (which doubtless explains why in 2008 the birth rate per 1,000 population was 45.8 in Afghanistan, 37.8 in Gaza and only 11.1 in Canada).

The book’s target market is likely, however, to focus more on Crowley’s opinions on day care (against) and parents’ rights to administer corporal punishment (for)—and on his fulminations on the evils of “pseudo-work” (most of government, the East Coast inshore fishery and sociology professors). Nevertheless, he does make some true assertions and points us to some important choices.

When Crowley argues that paid employment is important for much more than money—for self-esteem, personal happiness and maintaining functional norms of family life—no Keynesians would disagree. They would just note that firms have to have jobs on offer if workers are to get them. The current recession is a pointed reminder (to all but the most ideological) that the demand side of labour markets matters, and that jobs do not automatically appear in sufficient numbers to prevent unemployment.

Crowley is also absolutely right in arguing that labour shortages, when and if they emerge, will have pervasive impacts on both social norms and economic processes. I agree with him that labour shortages are “a worker’s best friend” in obtaining job improvements and that “the best social program is still a labour shortage” (even if I cannot understand how his summary of the many benefits of future labour shortages fits with the gloomy rhetoric of his introduction or with his advocacy of unrestricted immigration in Chapter 9).

Which makes it a pity that Crowley’s perception that macroeconomic content matters crucially for social policy success is not followed up with a discussion of Canada’s macroeconomic policy choices. The crucially important role that the Bank of Canada’s interest rate policy plays in maintaining growth in aggregate demand and total employment is a topic ignored in the current volume—and Canada will face tough choices in future years if the U.S. decides to inflate its way out of its current unemployment and debt problems.

Crowley is also right to note that the Canadian self-image as the “kinder and gentler” part of North America is a national myth of relatively recent manufacture. This self-conception may have, since about 1970, helped English-speaking Canadians find somewhat smug sense of distinctiveness from Americans, but Crowley’s read of Canada’s earlier social policy record is broadly accurate. “Colder and harder” is a better description of Canada, compared to the United States, until well into the 1960s. Canadians did not, for example, get CPP/QPP until 1967, some 32 years after Americans got social security, and Canada’s lower rate and depth of poverty are a strictly post-1970 phenomenon, which coincided with the growth of government transfers that Crowley deplores.

But history does matter and time does only run in one direction. Back in the colder, harder Canada...
of the 1930s to ‘50s to which Crowley would like to return, anglo Canadians could look to being part of a British empire on which the sun never set for their sense of national identity—a self-definition as essentially British that reinforced traditions of deference to regal authority dating back to the original

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 Thành’s answer is to agree mildly. Among French

Canadians, there was a similarly long-lasting tradi-

tion of deference to a conservative Catholic clergy.

In both English and French Canada, social cohe-

sion was also partly the product of a homogeneity

and a casual racism that we should not airbrush

out of the picture—there was, for example, no cho-

rus of public protest when Canada’s government
denied entry to Jewish refugees from Nazism in the

1930s. Aboriginal Canadians on reserves did not have
the vote until 1960 and immigra-
tion from China, India and
other non-white areas was not
allowed until the Immigration
Act reforms of 1967.

The influence of these tradi-
tional values weakened during the 1950s, and
during the 1960s the British empire and clerical
domination of Quebec both disappeared forever.

Waves of multicultural immigration were allowed
and Canada’s old self-images of national identity
did not fit any more—so the “kinder and gentler”
narrative filled a gap, and has done so for more than
40 years now. What are the chances that Canadians
will soon want to trade colder and harder for kinder
and gentler?

However flawed Crowley’s book may be, its
importance lies in prompting a discussion of just
what exactly our values are and how they might be
expressed in public policy. And sitting behind that
debate is the deeper question of who “we” will be
and what exactly is the glue that holds a country
together.

The survey data on social values are very clear
that in Canada, as in other countries, there is on
average a generalized preference for greater equal-
ity of economic outcome and a lot of skepticism
about the prevailing degree of equality of oppor-
tunity. Countries differ somewhat, but when asked
whether “inequality continues to exist because it
benefits the rich and powerful” the average respon-
dent rates the answer “strongly agree.” The survey
data, then, point toward the fact that people are
largely in favour of a more equal distribution of
wealth and income.

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The Canadian self-image as the “kinder and
gentler” part of North America is a national
myth of relatively recent manufacture.

States. The 2009 stimulus package of the Obama
administration, and the expansion of government it
embodies, would likewise be unthinkable with-
out the present economic crisis—and the Obama
administration is also hard at work lessening
Canada’s continental distinctiveness by expanding
government’s role in the U.S. healthcare system and
limiting taxation in a more redistributive direction.

Worldwide, the merits of financial sector regu-
lation and the virtues of an adequate social safety
net are now much more appreciated than they were
just two short years ago. Even the Harper govern-
ment in Canada has been forced by the pressure
of real events into a more activist role—expanding
EI benefits, running budget deficits, assuming part
ownership role of General Motors and Chrysler and
generally going in exactly the opposite direction
to Crowley’s “traditionalist juggernaut.”

So if the tide of events is not in fact now running
in the direction Crowley points to, what will the
impact of the book be? Who will read it, and how
might it change their attitudes and behaviour?

Crowley assumes, throughout the book, that
Canada will always maintain its current geographic
boundaries, and there is nothing in his argument
to suggest that he finds the idea of a united
Canada being a book that the base will love and nobody
will read. It or may be a conscious and quite
strategic decision—at a time when unemployment
is rising and untrammelled faith in global markets
is being widely questioned, to try to rally the dis-
couraged members of his flock

around the vision of a greener

pasture of labour shortages
over the hill, not now visible in
the debris of the current reces-
sion.

A predictable cost of all this
ergizing of the base is, how-
never, an increasing degree of inter-regional
nastiness in our national political culture—as might
be expected when one starts with the premise that
all our problems can be traced to an “excess” influ-
ence of a particular region of the country and will
only be solved when that region becomes politically
irrelevant.

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