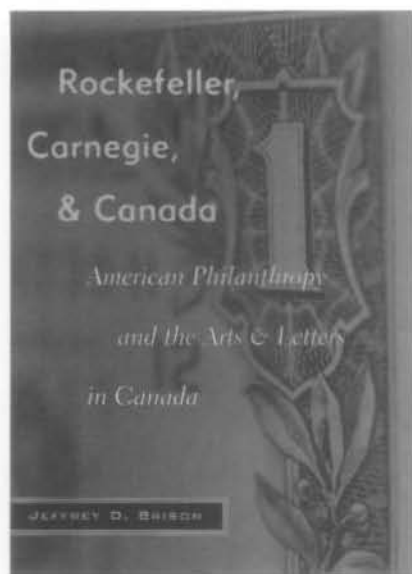




ROCKEFELLER, CARNEGIE, & CANADA
American Philanthropy and the Arts & Letters in Canada

Jeffrey D. BRISON

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In the wake of the 1995 Quebec Referendum, Canadian culture continues to be positioned in relation to a perceived imperialism based in the United States, particularly by those interested in defending and defining a uniquely Canadian identity. In 2004, vice-president of Radio-Canada, Sylvain Lafrance, commented that when the CBC/Radio Canada was founded in 1936, this "was in keeping with a necessary shift toward cultural protectionism. In view of the proximity of the United States, a powerful country with whom we share one of the longest borders in the world, Canadians felt the need to create a strong radio broadcasting industry capable of describing and defending the distinct character of our country."¹ Foreshadowing a much-publicized labour dispute by CBC/Radio-Canada

employees in which the very notion of a broadcasting company's ability to describe and defend any sense of universal nationality was called into question, Lafrance's words also point to larger debates surrounding a complex dichotomy that Jeffrey Brison describes as "American wealth and Canadian culture." Cultural historians often situate such debates in relation to what many have termed the "Crisis of Canada;" this terrain involves unraveling the complex myths and symbols that once defined the Canadian nation state. It is now well established that the concept of a bi-national, multicultural, liberal, egalitarian Canada has dissipated.²

In this context, the program of what Benedict Anderson terms "official nationalism" has failed in Canada. The constitutional crisis engendered a need to define Canadian identity and to mythologize national histories but this ideological battle was lost with the 1995 Referendum.³ Historian Ian McKay suggests that Northern North-America is consequently in an age that is "after Canada."⁴ He argues that the concept of Canada was an historical moment that "underwent a significant if partial popular revolution in the 1940s, characterized *inter alia* by the invention of Canadian citizenship, and it is from the middle decades of the twentieth century that most of what we now take for granted about 'Canada' – its bilingualism, its flag, its democracy, its limited social egalitarianism – was constructed."⁵ In other words, Canada, as it developed between 1945 and 1995, no longer exists. Ideologically, Quebec separated from Canada in 1995 and, despite the assumption that the two nations are given facts, any national history is in a state of flux. Today's struggle for survival as "Canadians" – whether it is in the wake of Wal-marts or through the halfhearted preservation of a national radio and television broadcasting company – is in a necessary state of constant evolution.⁶

It is within this contemporary context that *Rockefeller, Carnegie & Canada* finds its particular potency. Brison analyses Canada's culture wars with the United States by tracing the evolution of Canada's "official" cultural nationalism back to the age of large-scale American philanthropy. He argues that both the Rockefeller Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation have long had their hands in the proverbial pot of Canadian culture and scholarship. Far from suggesting that these American foundations duped the Canadian cultural elite into developing and branding a particular notion of national culture in Canada, Brison suggests that both Rockefeller and Carnegie bureaucrats targeted projects that were already a natural fit within a predetermined hegemony based on class, race and gender. Indeed, in the decades before the founding of the Canada Council (1930s – 1950s), prominent Canadian scholars in the humanities and the social sciences had little opportunity to finance and publish their research with the exception of the lucky few who benefited from the support of these American "philanthropoids." Moreover, as Brison suggests, while Canada was

attempting to free itself from “imperial entanglements” with Britain, it was simultaneously being integrated into a larger North American political and cultural economy (p.5). Although the Massey Commission had contemporary nationalist associations as a defender of Canadian culture with the purpose of solidifying national borders against the infiltrations of the U.S., as Brison notes, the commission “was itself emblematic of the depth of involvement of American philanthropy in Canadian culture” (p.7).

Brison’s navigation of what is conventionally understood as an absolutist American cultural imperialism might explain the sense of exhaustion and political powerlessness currently expressed by Canadian patriots. It would seem that, based on Brison’s argument, such debates are hardly new. In his compelling analysis Brison discusses institutions that benefited from American philanthropy such as the National Gallery of Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the CBC/Radio-Canada, the Canada Council, the National Film Board, the Canadian Social Science Research Council and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, not to mention various established Canadian universities in Toronto, Montreal, Kingston, Halifax, Winnipeg, Saskatchewan, Calgary, and Vancouver. Yet it would be a mistake to dismiss these institutions as distinct spheres of Canadian cultural and intellectual development or as pawns in a larger American imperialist scheme; as Brison contends, they are the product of a “a mixed economy of culture and, specifically, of partnerships between the American foundations and a Canadian cultural elite” (p.8). That is, Canadian cultural and intellectual institutions are neither doomed to the history-less landscape of postmodernity nor will they be ultimately lost in an ever-expanding climate of globalized cultural economies. What Brison persuasively shows us is that these institutional and ideological categories – conventionally understood along national boundaries – intersect, engage and inform each other in manifold and mutating ways.

Any cultural, political, or economic actions that derive from a national base can be scrutinized in a number of ways. On the one hand, nationally mandated Canadian institutions such as the CBC/Radio-Canada or the National Gallery of Canada are accused of being rendered ineffective in the wake of American cultural influence and control. However, these same institutions are touted as the only hope for, or saviour of, an authentically Canadian national culture. It could also be argued that these institutions are incapable of sustaining any sense of “Canadianness” in a nation that has been ideologically collapsed for over a decade. What Brison demonstrates is that any one of these lines of argument has deep roots in Rockefeller and Carnegie’s benefaction. These two trusts, he suggests, “were instrumental in the transition between two eras and two systems of cultural patronage,” from a private-style patronage that was unable to meet the needs of a modern nation in the 1920s, to the large-scale intra-national

cultural support that combined private patronage with federal and provincial monies (p.11). Canadian cultural producers seeking to organize and rationalize areas of expertise and to become established “cultural authorities” looked south to their American neighbours for both financial and ideological support (p.11).

The central paradox presented in this book, as Brison points out in his epilogue, is that “for anyone who considers the effects of reliance on the private sector for support of culture, the best indication of what lies ahead exists in the records of ‘private’ American philanthropic foundations in the process of creating what became an official ‘public’ culture in Canada in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s” (p.205-06). The system that emerged was unique to Canada and perhaps, as Lafrance suggests, this explains the desire of the sponsored institutions to remain uniquely “Canadian” even in 2006. While it might have been a more magnificent tale if Brison had told the story of Canadian resistance and opposition to American influence and cultural authority, such a project would not begin to unravel, question, and cut across the simplistic notions of American-Canadian difference, and of “public” and “private” spheres of influence as this book so skillfully achieves. It is a fascinating read that effectively navigates the questions and concerns of the current generation of cultural scholars about the Canadian nation-state, its ideological, cultural, economic, or political borders, and the transitory nature of its various manifestations.

ERIN MORTON

PhD Candidate, Art History

Queen’s University

Notes

1 Sylvain LAFRANCE, “The Role of the Media in the Dynamics of Cultural Diversity,” *CBC/Radio-Canada*, <<http://www.cbc.radio-canada.ca/speeches/20041025.shtml>> (28 March 2006).

2 Ian MCKAY, “After Canada: On Amnesia and Apocalypse in the Contemporary Crisis,” *Acadiensis* 28.1 (1998): 76-97.

3 *Ibid.*, 86.

4 *Ibid.*, 87.

5 *Ibid.*, 81.

6 *Ibid.*, 87.