

Celebration

COMMEMORATING CANADA: A PERSONAL JOURNEY

By Cyril Dabydeen

My sense of being Canadian is marked every year on July 1 when Ottawa –the nation’s capital– where I’ve lived for four decades becomes a transformed city. This year marks the special 150th commemoration from the time of Confederation in 1867 when the country declared “Dominion Day” codified in the British North America Act. Then Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick became politically unified; later, the prairie and western coast became part of the Dominion via the Canadian Pacific Railway. “Canada Day” this year goes beyond the usual celebration when hundreds of thousands will assemble on Parliament Hill. Prince Charles and wife Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, will participate. Musical performances by the country’s finest, and speeches by the Prime Minister and the Governor General, as well as parades and a panoply of other activities will feature prominently. Snowbird jets—Canada’s planes—will do acrobatic dives demonstrating national hubris. Flag-waving will be ubiquitous. Spectacular fireworks will crown it all on July 1!

I’ve attended these celebratory events over the years, in some sense to mark my own Canadian spirit of the place with my immigrant self intact. People become animated never so much as at this special time, and governments (provinces, municipalities, territories) and educational, cultural and arts organizations are all undertaking special activities. And maybe Canadians want to be distinctive from the chauvinistic neighbour to the South, the USA.

Indeed Canada is not a republic, but a monarchy. The Queen of Britain is the titular head of state through our Governor General. English and French traditions are strong (perhaps muted in Quebec on Canada Day, for historical reasons). Canada is also a palpably diverse nation seen demographically in major cities like Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal. The Ottawa-Gatineau area itself has a 20% population of racial minority peoples. I’ve travelled across Canada to over 30 towns and cities, from Whitehorse to Newfoundland (as a former municipal and government official), and have absorbed the immediacy of a changing Canada.

Are Native peoples part of the sesquicentennial celebrations? Post-colonial angst and that the country is fundamentally theirs is part of the activism, especially seen on the West Coast. The government apology to Native Peoples for “cultural genocide” stemming from decades of forced assimilation by the Residential Schools is timely!

i

Who are Canadians and what is Canadian are questions tied to nationhood, especially during this time, as it should be—a phenom-

enon occurring in Europe and elsewhere, also, due not least to migration patterns, decolonization, and globalization. Political philosopher John Ralston Saul speaks of the triangular foundation of Canada—the Anglo-Saxon (read Anglo-Celtic) and French peoples reflected on two sides of the triangle, and Aboriginal peoples on the base line. Ottawa—named derived from a Native tribe—used to have over 300,000 Algonquin Indians. The name “Canada” itself is of Native origin, as are numerous other places across the country with symbolic evoca-



tions, like Sioux Lookout and Moose Jaw. But place-names in Ottawa are infused with British heritage such as King Edward Avenue, Lord Elgin Street and Prince of Wales Drive. Scottish-born Sir John A. Macdonald was the first Prime Minister, and others like McKenzie King, Wilfred Laurier and John Diefenbaker are hallmark figures. French-Canadian Pierre Trudeau is an icon; the Charter of Rights and Freedoms was enshrined under his stewardship. But the English-French “solitude” is existential, though Quebec is no longer a viable threat of separation (as it was a few decades ago).

It’s a strong, unified country with Liberalism and Conservatism tied to democratic-socialist ideals (universal health care, etc.)—a Canada of “an endless land of clean water, maple trees, Mounties and French secessionists” (said late controversial Toronto Mayor Rob Ford). It sounds passe. Internationally, Canada is still positioned as a country noted for peace-keeping advanced by Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson.

The shift in immigration patterns since the 70’s has led to awareness and sensitivity in governmental policies and programs, if only as concerns about human rights and diversity as we continue to wrestle with foundational values. The shibboleth of respect for all peoples (old and new Canadians) is key as we debate concerns relating to Islamophobia and condemn anti-Semitism, for instance. Significantly, Conservative Prime Minister Joe Clark described Canada as the “first international country,” and Liberal Prime Minister

Paul Martin officially called Canada “a post-modernist nation”.

ii

My own Canadian space with my immigrant status is inevitably marked by the identity question, always in flux. Is ethnicity or geography destiny as I come to grips with my own angst about who’s a real Canadian with my “visible minority” profile? That everyone is an immigrant or from an immigrant background (said Margaret Atwood) is still viewed with ambivalence. But new immigrants from Asia, Africa, Caribbean and the Middle East now, directly or indirectly, challenge the view of Canada as only “the idea of the north”—if perhaps as a rarefied or metaphysical concept. “Multicultural abrasion” occurs as we wrestle with ethnicity tied to our beingness amidst other pressing existential realities (clean environment, health-care).

Pierre Trudeau—father of the current Prime Minister, Justin—said it best: “There is no such thing as a model or ideal Canadian. What could be more absurd than an ‘all-Canadian’ boy or girl? A society which emphasizes uniformity is one which creates intolerance and hate...and what we must continue to cherish are...compassion, love, and understanding.”

When I become fraught about identity bordering on the “the narcissism of small differences” (Michael Ignatieff), I recall a moment of epiphany when I’d visited the prairie and tundra heartland of Lethbridge (Alberta) and became overawed by the sheer size of the country. In a poem “As the World Disappears,” I ask:

Where do I come from  
and where will I go next...  
looking up at the tall sky?

In poetry and fiction the images I create will reflect my deeper spirit in my sometimes hyphenated-Canadian self. Multiculturalism gives me room to experience the possibilities of my “many selves” beyond the binary, even as I will dwell on Trudeau’s words about essential human values, and join with thousands of others in “celebrating” Canada!

*A former Poet Laureate of Ottawa, Cyril Dabydeen was born in Guyana, South America. He teaches Writing at the University of Ottawa. He has written a number of books including novels and poetry. He is included in the Heinemann, Oxford and Penguin Books of Caribbean Verse. His novel, Drums of My Flesh won the top Guyana Prize and was nominated for the 2007 IMPAC/Dublin Literary Prize. Contact—cdabydeen@ncf.c*

