

A History of Canadian Culture

Anthony di Mascio

Volume 72, 2010

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/mcr72br02>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

National Museums of Canada

ISSN

1718-1259 (imprimé)

1927-9264 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

di Mascio, A. (2010). Compte rendu de [*A History of Canadian Culture*]. *Material Culture Review*, 72, 69–70.

semées depuis le début de l'ouvrage le long d'un chemin que certains trouveront sinueux nous amènent finalement à l'aspect des cloches que l'auteur veut traiter, selon le sous-titre du livre (*Sujets de culture*). Après quelques mots sur la campanologie actuelle au Québec et sur les sources utilisées dans l'inventaire qui suit, il propose la biographie de cloches « particulièrement marquantes du patrimoine québécois » et « qui racontent beaucoup sur l'histoire culturelle du Québec ». Tout en faisant de nouveaux détours par la France, les États-Unis, la Russie et quelques provinces canadiennes, Mathieu décrit les plus importantes à ses yeux et en explique les éléments contextuels, autant sociaux que musicaux.

Dans le chapitre 4 (« Les modes de mise en valeur »), l'auteur propose diverses manières de préserver et redonner vie à une ou des cloches. Toutes les possibilités sont alors évoquées : le classement par le ministère de la Culture, le devoir des sonneurs et carillonneurs de perpétuer leur

art, le développement d'approches touristiques ou même la création d'une collection nationale. Mathieu prend ensuite appui sur sa formation en arts visuels pour amener l'idée que les artistes peuvent fournir une aide précieuse dans la redéfinition de « la place du sacré dans ce qui a du sens aujourd'hui », compte tenu que les cloches ont été généralement identifiées à la religion catholique.

La démarche de l'auteur, si elle n'est pas fidèle aux canevas habituels, nous montre tout de même que les cloches sont bien des sujets de culture. Les exemples fournis se situent à différents degrés de proximité de la cloche en tant qu'objet et sont parfois tirés de domaines connexes ou similaires, mais cela s'explique aisément vu le peu de projets de mise en valeur effectivement réalisés à ce jour. En ces temps de réflexion sur le patrimoine religieux, l'ouvrage de Mathieu permet de lancer la discussion sur une partie souvent oubliée de ce patrimoine. Il permettra aussi à plusieurs lecteurs de prendre un premier contact avec le monde des cloches dans sa réalité québécoise.

ANTHONY DI MASCIO

Review of

Vance, Jonathan F. 2009. *A History of Canadian Culture*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.

Pp. xi, 500, Hardcover, ISBN 978-0-19-541909-2, \$39.99.

In *A History of Canadian Culture*, Jonathan F. Vance traces the roots and development of Canadian culture from prehistory to the present day. As one of Canada's most prominent military historians, Vance may seem a peculiar author for an introduction to Canadian cultural history. Vance's previous work, however, has not only examined Canada's military past but also how Canadians remember, interpret and commemorate their past. In the last two decades, Vance has provided some of the most groundbreaking research that chronicles the country's heritage and its connection to Canadian identities. As such, Vance's years of insight into the continuities and changes in Canada's socio-cultural history situate him well to offer a general interpretation of Canada's cultural legacy.

In this book, Vance chooses to narrow his analysis of culture by defining it as a "synonym for the arts" (viii). In this regard, he emphasizes literature, music, the performing arts and the visual arts. Seventeen chapters take the reader chrono-

logically through the various trends and themes in the Canadian arts. In the first chapter the author considers the various ways in which the arts were intertwined with Aboriginal life and society. Vance provides an exceptional narrative of the artistic accomplishments of pre-colonized Aboriginal societies, and suggests that art played a central role in not only the social and cultural, but also the political and economic life of such societies.

Chapters two to six examine both the impact of European settlement on Aboriginal culture, as well as the various contributions of colonial artists to the cultural history of Canada. As the years progressed in New France and British North America, the author argues, it became clear that the new world would be more than a replica of the old; it would be a place of distinct forms of artistic expression with an evolving cultural heritage. It is also in these chapters that Vance discusses the struggle between "high culture" and "low culture." For example, the author suggests that while the colonial elites found

theatre such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* appealing, the labouring classes were looking for more simple entertainment as a diversion from their working day (64). It should be pointed out that terms such as "high culture" and "low culture," remnants of a Victorian era of cultural analysis that tended to regard culture as something people possess more or less of, have been increasingly problematized by cultural theorists. Nevertheless, this binary analysis allows Vance to propose a central battle in the arts that pits the cultural elite against the masses.

Chapters seven to nine examine the ways in which Canadians both succeeded and failed at forging a distinct artistic culture in the wake of Confederation in 1867. Chapters ten to thirteen emphasize the blossoming of Canadian art from the First World War to the Second. The correlation between Canada's heightened sense of identity after its international campaign in the First World War and the flourishing of the arts thereafter is not, Vance insists, a mere coincidence. Throughout this period homegrown artists like the Group of Seven helped shape a distinct Canadian artistic milieu that received international recognition, even if it was not always favourable. The remaining chapters, covering postwar Canada to the present day, depart from a historical examination of the trends and themes in the arts and instead focus on public policy in a new era of state intervention and "government patronage."

Defining culture as a synonym for the arts allows the author to focus his attention on what he believes is representative of Canada's cultural past, but ultimately sets the stage for an unsatisfying survey of culture in Canada. While architecture is woven into Vance's analysis of the arts in Canada, other areas of cultural importance are simply overlooked or ignored. Why, for example, was material culture not more closely examined? Why was there no discussion on the significance of museums to the cultural history of Canada? Aside from a few references to certain art galleries, in fact, the author makes no mention of museums or developments in the collection, preservation and dissemination of

material culture. This is especially disappointing given the significant role Canada has played in the development of museums and museum work since the 19th century.

Equally disappointing is the lack of discussion concerning Canadian contributions to the study of culture. Indeed, in this sphere Canada was setting standards as early as the 19th century. In 1855, the University of Toronto—already internationally recognized for its contributions to the study of archeology—offered the first courses on ethnology in the English-speaking world. Perhaps a more shocking omission in *A History of Canadian Culture* is a consideration of the ideas and contributions of Marshall McLuhan, arguably the most prominent culture and media theorist of 20th-century Canada (if not the world). Such omissions should underline that the reader will miss out on a review of some significant cultural thought and intellectual developments in Canadian history. Canada's cultural contributions are indeed more varied and multifaceted than the author's overview provides. This book is very much limited to a history of the arts in Canada, and would have been more aptly titled as such.

Culture, as it is treated by Vance, does little to call attention to aspects of human activity, ways of thinking and understanding, modes of language and rituals of life. A history of Canadian culture undertaken through these perspectives is yet to be written, but will certainly break free from the binary analysis of high and low culture and instead emphasize the rich and complex ways Canadian culture has shaped how we think and behave and how it has affected our relationships with each other and our understandings of ourselves. Despite its limitations, this book is by far the most comprehensive history of the arts in Canada, and should become an instant classic in the field of Canadian cultural history. Moreover, with a writing style that is as captivating as it is easy to read, Vance's book builds a bridge between academic and popular history. It should find an ample audience among both students and the general public.