
The quest to provide domestic cultural material in a land as vast, heterogeneous, and under-populated as Canada is an ongoing economic and political challenge. Of course, there have always been vibrant localized pockets of artistic expression across the country, but as media became truly “mass” at the beginning of the 20th century, Canada struggled to find its voice. The convenient and certainly more economic approach was to simply pluck from the cultural shelves of willing content providers like Great Britain and the United States; after all, Britain offered the comfort of tradition for much of English-speaking Canada, while the United States was the exciting and bold face of modernity. Instead, Canada progressed along a unique path of cultural self-promotion that has both celebrated the confederation, and, in the case of federally-funded Québec nationalist expression, torn at the fabric of the very unity it was designed to promote. While there have been unequivocal successes (creating a Canadian music industry, early work of the National Film Board), there has never been unanimous agreement, even within the artistic community it was designed to support, that government promotion is even necessary or healthy (see Bryan Adams and/or Mordecai Richler).

In his book, Canadian Content: Culture and the Quest for Nationhood, Ryan Edwardson traces the evolution of Canada’s convoluted political, economic, and artistic efforts to ensure a national cultural perspective. Perhaps more importantly Edwardson observes how the overall objectives of Canadian content policies have advanced, even to the point of contradicting the goals of some of the early architects of a national cultural plan. The research for this book involved sifting through a long list of Canadian government publications and minutes from various committee meetings, as well as publications that will be familiar to scholars of contemporary Canadian cultural history. The result is an accessible, intriguing, well-researched
study that will prove valuable to academics involved in various areas of Canadian cultural policy.

Edwardson proposes that Canadian culture and the greater nation-building project has experienced three distinct phases: the 1951 Massey Commission vision of Canada, which included a well-supported national arts community free from government intrusion; the new nationalism of the 1960s and 70s, which called for quotas, ownership regulations, and strong government support; and finally, the Trudeau-initiated cultural industrialism, which today continues to emphasize the economic advantages of government cultural support. For each era, Edwardson examines the social mobilization and political impact in a broad range of cultural endeavours.

Edwardson’s writing is generally solid, in particular the transitional work between chapters, but several middle sections are choppy as he uses an almost checklist approach of dividing the chapters into theatre, music, film, academia, publishing, and television. However, this approach is also a strength, as it means there is something in the book for scholars involved in each of these often independently-viewed zones of cultural policy. It is one of the original contributions of this book. Other similar studies have usually focused upon a particular pillar (Jeffrey Cormier’s *The Canadianization Movement* on academia; Herschel Hardin’s *Closed Circuits* on Canadian television; Michael Dorland’s *So Close to the State*s on Canadian film policy, etc.), but Edwardson successfully demonstrates the interconnectedness of the policies surrounding each of these cultural fields.

A shortcoming of Edwardson’s book stems from his glib dismissal of the Massey era as dominated by elitist “Anglophilic artsy long hairs” (p. 79, allowing for the sardonic tone) with no connection to Canadians’ true cultural lives. While Edwardson is correct to note the Massey Commission’s support of the CBC and overall preference for the “high arts,” it was also that Commission’s report that legitimized the role of private broadcasters within the Canadian system. Numerous public meetings were held across the country, representing a wide cross-section of the Canadian public. Nevertheless, Edwardson belabours the point that the Massey Commission was aloof and out of touch.

Another key problem is Edwardson’s conclusion that the current policy of cultural industrialism “does little to serve the need for a domestic discourse” (p. 282), a key (and fundamentally true) position that remains woefully underdeveloped in the body of the book. The democratic potential of the arts is rarely addressed. This deficiency could have been dealt with if Edwardson had considered more thoroughly the foundational efforts of Graham Spry and the Aird Report of 1929. This early work in Canadian cultural policy in the age of radio was strongly informed by the necessity of Canadian content and the need for democratic discourse to utilize the developing mass media. The pioneering labour of this era is inexplicably given short shrift by Edwardson, relegating the period to essentially two pages, and instead using the 1951 Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences (Massey Report) as the launching pad for Canadian cultural nationalist sentiments.

These reservations aside, Edwardson’s book makes an important contribution to the ongoing debate of the place of government within the artistic life of a nation.
References

Gregory Taylor, Ryerson University