Robert Bothwell, *Your Country, My Country: A Unified History of the United States and Canada*

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4 We Canadians might have cause to feel slighted by the current President of the United States. Why don’t we merit a wall? Our border is undoubtedly as “insecure” as that with Mexico. After all, as Robert Bothwell reminds us, Canada, like Mexico, has “since 1999... been regarded as a potential source of terrorists slipping into the United States” (2). There is little aside from vast stretches of wilderness along much of the 49th parallel, particularly in the western reaches of the continent. Anyone could walk across!
5 And indeed, in the early days of the Trump administration, scores of asylum seekers did just that, arriving in Canada in flight from Trump’s crackdown on “illegal aliens” and his ban on Muslims. Since 2002, a “Safe Third Country” agreement has been in place, requiring that persons seeking refugee status must make their claims in whichever country (Canada or the US) they first arrive. With Trump’s signing of Executive Order 13769, suspending the Refugee Admission Program and banning travel from select African and Mideastern countries, lawyers and refugees claimed that the US could no longer be considered safe. In the last two years, an estimated 28,000 undocumented migrants have crossed over.
6 Though he hasn’t yet called Canada a shithole, Trump has vented spleen repeatedly at what he considers unfair trade and tariff deal. In addition to renegotiating the North American Free Trade Act—preliminary approval of the new “United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement” was arrived at on September 30, 2018—Trump’s outbursts have in many other ways caused havoc. When Canada criticized Saudi Arabia for human rights
abuses, the Canadian ambassador was expelled; Trump, in the meanwhile, has been dismissive, denying that the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi was ordered by the Saudi Crown Prince. And when Canadian authorities, at the behest of the US, arrested Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou, China retaliated by imprisoning random Canadian politicians and businessmen.

Should we be worried?

Although Robert Bothwell, Professor of History and International Relations at the University of Toronto, has publicly labelled the Trump administration “a slow moving disaster” and, more recently, on the website of Canadian Business, lamented that Canada “has never been this alone,” the perspective offered in his 2015 volume, Your Country, My Country: A Unified History of the United States and Canada, is fairly sanguine. By and large, Bothwell argues in his sprawling, detailed, and often quite droll history, and over the long haul, and despite a slew of differences—most minor, one major—the two countries are indeed “unified.” We share, in large part, a common language, a common culture, a common set of social and economic assumptions, a common political orientation: “what seems clear when we look at the past three hundred years of northern North American history is the close resemblance of Canadian and American society, on virtually every level. Resemblance is not identity, and closeness is not harmony. . . . What can be found in the United States can be found, soon enough, in Canada. But it is seldom found in the same proportions, and it frequently occurs at different times” (9).

The US is bigger, richer, more powerful. Canada—since about the time that Lester Pearson was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his deft management of the Suez crisis—has cultivated a national myth that it is a much more humane country. Even so, in large part, Bothwell’s analysis is inarguable. Particularly since the Second World War, the two counties have shared a commitment to the west, although the US, as superpower, has been the driving partner in these ventures. Yet, despite a common geopolitical worldview, we have had our differences. In 1949, Canada was a founding member of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); Canadian troops fought in Korea, but not in Vietnam. Canadians joined the war effort in Afghanistan, but passed on Iraq. Our politics, too, are, as Bothwell intimates, often slightly out of sync: at a national level, Canada can move to the right (sending Conservative Stephen Harper to the Prime Minister’s office from 2006 to 2015), as America feints left (these were roughly the years when Barack Obama, a social progressive, was US President). And vice versa; about a year after Liberal Justin Trudeau took office, the US electorate—perhaps with the collusion of Russian agents—saddled the world with Donald Trump.

Even in terms of national health policies, seemingly the most notable opposition between the US and Canada, the two countries are not so far apart as might appear at first blush. As Bothwell explains, our differences are largely of nuance and timing. Canada acted to implement health care insurance nationally in 1968, and the institution is now a source of national pride, despite drastic cuts at provincial levels and a series of ideological attacks on the part of some Conservatives. However, on this issue as on so many, Americans seem to suffer from amnesia. President Lyndon Johnson had, in fact, pushed a limited version of socialized medicine in the form of Medicare through Congress in 1965, but the war in Vietnam derailed his more ambitious domestic agenda. After abortive efforts by the Clinton administration, an Affordable
Care Act (nicknamed Obamacare, affectionately or not) was passed in 2010 and has so far survived a series of well-orchestrated legal and political challenges.

Most histories of British North America tend to conclude with the Treaty of Ghent that ended the War of 1812, and effectively settled the border between the two countries. Modern historiography, from the 19th century on, tends to be understood as the history of nations, which should make Bothwell’s study a welcome contribution to ongoing theoretical elaborations of transnationalism and border studies, both of which projects suggest that histories of peoples and histories of political formations are not always coincident. Bothwell’s surveys of 18th and 19th century developments are compelling and detailed, showing how the populations and ideas moved about freely across the continent. Yet Bothwell does little to challenge typical conventions of history writing; chockful of information, the book focuses primarily on matters of trade, foreign relations, and political life. In short, Bothwell accepts the “national” approach, but complicates it by seeing the countries’ histories as effectively and inextricably intertwined.

Bothwell’s overarching thesis is that we are so much the same because we are so much the same people: descendants of British North America. In fact, as he points out, the most salient difference between the political cultures of the two countries is the huge presence of Francophones in the heart of Canada. Though he notes the significant impact of the Spanish Empire on the history of the Americas, Bothwell has little to say about the legacy of that empire: the formidable presence of Latino culture in Florida, California, and broad swathes of the American southwest (not to mention the Caribbean, where Spanish, French, and British colonialism has left distinct marks). In some ways, the persistent presence of Francophone peoples and cultures in Canada should be comparable to the presence of Latin culture in the US. But Bothwell never explores this possibility. If the history of politics is, willy-nilly, the history of peoples, it seems that the friction between politics and peoples would merit more attention.

In other ways, his emphasis on British homogeneity tends to lead him astray. Bothwell provides, for example, a lucid exposition of the distinct histories of slavery in the two countries, though he offers little explanation as to why Americans, despite their paradoxical commitment to radical republicanism, were so much slower than others in the British empire to abandon the slave trade. Remarkably, though he is careful to highlight the financial and philosophical contributions of Canadians to the Abolition movement (something American historians tend to neglect), Bothwell devotes only a single paragraph to the Underground Railroad.

In the same vein, Bothwell gives short shrift to recent conceptualizations to new world society as broadly “settler-colonialism.” Though Indian policies have differed drastically, neither the US nor Canada has a particularly honorable history when it comes to the treatment of native populations. Canada, being Canada, has at least paid some lip service of late to its record of cruelty, setting up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2008 to investigate the history of Indian Residential School system, report on findings, and make recommendations for reparation and reconciliation. Bothwell, however, does not mention the TRC. As a political historian with an Anglo perspective, his book slights Indigenous contributors to Canadian life after Tecumseh.

Another obvious similarity between the two might be explored at more length. Both countries—despite Trump’s invective—have, historically, dealt in largely the same way with vast waves of immigrant populations—to date, at least. In the late 19th century and
into the 20th, Irish, Chinese, Slavs, Jews, Southern Europeans have come to the continent in search of prosperity. Their labor was readily exploited; but what about their social and cultural contributions? And what about the millions of Asians, Arabs, south Asians, who have transformed both American and Canadian society so drastically over the last four decades or so?

Understandably, as a political historian, Bothwell, has little to say about culture, either the culture of immigrants or Anglophile culture. He does acknowledge that the American culture industries (radio, television, Hollywood) have dominated the scene. Following the directives of the Massey Report of 1951, the federal government of Canada made a concerted effort to push back against the cultural imperialism of the US, funding a series of institutions across the media, culture, the arts, and education to promote Canadian content. A National Library was established along with the Canadian Council for the Arts; the missions of the Canadian Broadcasting Company and the National Film Board of Canada were expanded, and, during the 1960s, numerous new universities were built in all provinces. It perhaps is no small reflection of Bothwell’s obsessions and biases as a historian to note that, as the first Ambassador to Washington D.C., Vincent Massey merits a mention. As the primary mover behind postwar Canadian culture and knowledge industries, the influential report he penned does not.

This history—and Bothwell’s scanting of it—is significant, however, because our current global crises have emerged precisely at the confluence of popular identities (be they national, religious, ethnic, or racial), culture, and government policy.

How quickly has the world changed since 2015? Bothwell’s book appeared well before the rise of Trump, before Trump’s efforts (welcome as they may be in some respects) to dismantle the American empire, and before the global advance of right-wing populism. Yet virulent forms of ultra-nationalism and white supremacy are concerningly afoot today in Canada, despite Canada’s claim to above vitriolic extremism. Timing might not be everything, but it is important. As Bothwell implicitly admits, one conclusion we can draw from Your Country, My Country is that ideas and ideologies that are initially formulated in the US and elsewhere around the globe are subsequently transplanted to Canadian soil. And so too neofascist modes of racism.

In considering the past and future of the US and Canada, we will need to look beyond Trump’s foolishness, and beyond the ways he may have upended the traditional alliances between the US and Canada.

Put starkly, Canada may as of 2019, be the last country on earth still dedicated to the modern project of “multiculturalism.” But how long can that last?