

## **“A New Canadian National Spirit”: Allegorical Miss Canada and the Occult Canadian State**

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My paper is situated within debates concerning Canada’s imagined cultural nationhood and the state that is often concealed in cultural forms. I will pay particular attention to a post-World War I cartoon entitled “Evolution,” by A.G. Racey, from the *Montreal Star* in 1918 (figure #1). Since pre-Confederation, Miss Canada appeared frequently in editorial cartoons as an uncomplicated image meant to allegorize Canada. Newspapers and magazines where she was typically found include *Canadian Illustrated News*, *Montreal Star*, *Montreal Herald*, *Grip*, *Saturday Night*, *Le Canard*, and *Quebec Chronicle*. She also occasionally appeared in federal government publications, electoral campaign posters and private advertisements for consumer products. Earlier versions from the late nineteenth century depict her as the daughter of Britannia, so she is both an historically generated, Imperial icon and a home-grown allegory. Her roles as daughter of Britannia, mother of the nation, and symbolically of its “native” sons are not especially compatible, in the same way that filial piety and independence from familial constraints foster competing desires. Neither is Miss Canada’s beautiful, pristine, morally sound persona at ease with that which she mythically conceals—the complex and often indecorous workings of the growing nation state. In order to contextualize this image, I touch upon examples of earlier, classically inspired versions of Miss Canada appearing as an Imperial daughter of Britannia, showing how the 1918 cartoon chronicles a newly forged national spirit following Canada’s role in World War I.

As a cultural object signifying the nation, Miss Canada works to legitimize and naturalize the nation-state. As Susan Hayward points out, “[n]ationalist discourses around culture work to forge the link—the hyphen—between nation and state. Nationalist discourses act then to make the practise of the state as ‘natural’ as the concept of nation” (89). In Racey’s cartoon, the nation is proffered while the state is disavowed through allegory and myth. My reading of the cartoon hinges on this disavowal, this ideological move. My aim,

then, is to de-naturalize this version of Miss Canada, and, in so doing, foreground the occult historic Canadian state.

Because this allegory is so suggestive of typical national allegories such as Britannia, Marianne, Columbia, and allegorical ideals of Justice or Peace,<sup>1</sup> it is a singularly empty sign, a shell, or as Theresa Kelley puts it, “an impervious, material cover” (256). It is as if the same image of a voluptuous woman could be filled up with any national significance of choice. Allegory here is crucial to the work that ideology performs because these female historical antecedents are almost interchangeable with this woman, Miss Canada, who naturalizes nationhood through a culturally familiar face and figure. While a national allegory may parade as a “natural” signifier for the nation, it is anything but. Roland Barthes contends that as a second-order signification operating adjacent to language, myth turns history into nature; it “naturalizes” the image, emptying the allegorical signifier of contingency and of history (142). Myth may be described as a way that ideology works within representations, while allegory’s vacuity and interchangeability make it a suitable ideological tool because it empties the sign of particularity and of historical significance. Miss Canada’s accoutrements of shield, cornucopia, and maple leaf provide the only clues as to the location of this nation-space. The cartoon is a highly stylized, idealized depiction of Miss Canada recalling the classical drapery—complete with loose folds, a sweeping train and Empire waistline—of earlier cartoons from the 1870s. Miss Canada emerges from the clouds in a flood of sunshine, with one hand pointing heavenward, while the other arm encircles a cornucopia of the nation’s bounty. She balances a maple leaf shield against her leg. The caption, in the form of a cloth banner, reads: “A New Canadian National Spirit.” The cartoon illustrates great hope and promise following the devastation of World War I. The moniker “National Spirit” indicates a not unprecedented, but certainly unambiguous, invocation to nationhood: Canada has been forged into this shape of an independent, courageous, modern, and, above all, unified nation through its role in the Great War.

The state, occluded by this signification, has not, however, disappeared; it is merely hiding. The slow, violent, and painful process of “coming of age” into nationhood—including divisive, rancorous issues such as French language

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<sup>1</sup> See Warner.

restrictions in Ontario schools, known as Regulation 17, and the conscription crisis—is sanitized, etherealized by the broad sweep performed by allegory and myth. These are the theoretical terms through which I will demonstrate the Racey cartoon’s ideological coordinates and show how the state is indeed a palpable presence behind the cultural form. The issues I bring to bear are particularly relevant examples of crisis in French Canada, in light of the fact that “Evolution” appeared in a Montréal English-language newspaper. I cannot bring this absence of the state and historical crisis into presence by examining the cartoon alone, even in relation to other cartoons of Miss Canada, but by an historical analysis that will foreground those moments that Miss Canada conceals.

Barely noticeable at the top of the cartoon is the title, “Evolution,” a word which points to a teleology. Who or what has Miss Canada emerged from, and what might she progress towards from here? I will leave the latter question for the moment, but as for the former, I point to a series of images chosen randomly as to their dates and artists but deliberately for the way that they show both the mother/daughter relationship between Miss Canada and Britannia and the familiar classical styling: drapery, wreath or helmet, shield or banner, sandals or bare feet (figure #s 2-4). Features of classical allegory connect these figures temporally to historical antecedents as far back as Greek mythological figures such as Athena or Nike, lending historical weight and legitimacy to them. Even the contemporary styling of the seated figures of Britannia and Miss Canada in “A Pertinent Question” (figure #2 *Diogenes* 1869), highlight the familial relationship while they are not fashioned in classical raiment. Although the daughter in these cartoons stands in for Canada, protection, admonishment, or approval offered by her mother, Britannia, registers as strong historical, economic, cultural, and political ties and obligations to Britain, but also as anxiety around identity politics. As an emblem of Dominion in the British Empire, Miss Canada occasionally strains at her yoke in the international arena where her powers are limited. Even in 1918, when Canada became a *de facto* nation on the killing fields of Europe, she was still a Dominion in a *de jure* sense until the Balfour Declaration of 1926<sup>2</sup> and, most especially, the passing of the Statute of Westminster in 1931, when Canada was

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<sup>2</sup> “Lord Balfour’s proposal for a ‘British Commonwealth of Nations’ linked by no more than sentiment, tradition, and a common monarch” (Morton 212).

granted control of her international affairs. Considering the affirmation of classical styling in “Evolution,” how must we read this allegory of nation? To what does she owe her particular national character? After all, Miss Canada as a mother of nation or a contemporary “regular gal” was quite common in cartoon images, and had been for several decades, so the artist could have chosen a more modern version. Theorists of nation such as Benedict Anderson often assert that nations must be seen to be simultaneously ancient and hoary and new and pristine. This version of Miss Canada is ancient in her classical complements but altogether new in specific ways: her banner reading “A New Canadian National Spirit,” her emergence from the clouds in a flood of sunshine above the detritus of Europe evoking a “new day,” her bold return of the look back to the viewer, and even, to a lesser extent, her pert, contemporary hairstyle, all signify newness, freshness, modernity, progress, and promise. Thus the allegory, like most cultural representations of nation, contains the venerable past while it anticipates the limitless future.

In order to function as ideology and myth, however, certain aspects of the past must be selectively forgotten. These are the irremediable, divisive moments of recent history that are cloaked by myth. From this litany of ignominious and repressive state functions—Ontario’s Regulation 17, the Wartime Elections Act which disenfranchised “aliens” who took the oath of allegiance after 1902, a War Measures Act which enabled the government to “rule by decree” (Sprague 145), the introduction of income tax, and the Military Service Act of 1917 which paved the way for conscription—I have chosen to focus on Regulation 17 and Conscription because they fuelled an already explosive relationship between French and English Canada. Quebec nationalism solidified as a result of these wartime crises.

In spite of its origins in Ontario French language rights, Regulation 17 cannot be considered as separate from the war effort because it followed, helped to explain, and may perhaps have encouraged the drop in French-Canadian voluntarism in recruitment. As French Canadians felt more distant from what was described as a European, Imperialist War, they felt even more alienated by “the Prussians next door” in Ontario. Although separate, Catholic schools were a right guaranteed by the BNA Act, French language schools were not. They developed in Ontario through demographics and custom. In 1910, Bishop of London Michael Fallon complained in a meeting with Ontario M.P.P. W.J. Hanna that children in

these schools were not receiving the same standard of education as in public schools where English was the language of instruction. This report was leaked to the press, an inquiry launched by the department of Education and, in 1915, Regulation 17 was put into effect as an act of the Provincial Parliament. Later, “a Judicial Committee of the Privy Council upheld the law in 1916” (Sprague 144). What this ruling meant was that children had to be taught in English after the first form (grade two or three), and in French not more than an hour a day after that. Of the two inspectors who must visit the schools, one had to be English and the other was not guaranteed to be either French speaking or Catholic.

Reaction to Regulation 17 was swift, irate, and enduring, enlisting the help of articulate Quebecers like Henri Bourassa and his vehicle, *Le Devoir*, where he argued:

The whole problem of the French language and of French survival is being raised in Ontario. For Canada, for all in America, it is not on the battlefields of Europe that survival will be maintained or extinguished.... The enemies of the French language, of French Civilization in Canada are not on the beaches or the shores of the Spree; but the English-Canadian anglicizers, the Orange intriguers, or Irish priests. (qtd. in Copp and Tate 23)

In this admittedly persuasive and sweeping rhetoric, one can hear the resounding chords of ethno-linguistic and ethno-religious tensions. Despite appeals to the federal government, it quickly became apparent that the state provided no legal recourse for minority language rights at the provincial level.<sup>3</sup> Short of re-writing the Treaty of Paris, in an impossible clarity of hindsight,<sup>4</sup> politicians, clerics, parents, and sympathizers had only their protests to alleviate their sense of injustice. In *La Vérité*, French language pastors of Ottawa registered their protest:

We rank it [Regulation 17] among those things which are so odious and

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<sup>3</sup>And, for many French Canadians both inside and outside Quebec, the memory of the Manitoba Schools question, not to mention the Northwest Rebellion and the hanging of Louis Riel, was still keen.

<sup>4</sup> See Senator Belcourt’s speech of 1912 (qtd in Zucchi 61).

disastrous that we could never try them. Who would blame the Belgians and the French for not having assented to testing under protest, the German Invasion? (qtd. in Zucchi 71)

Again the war is invoked as a parallel to the kinds of repressive measures experienced by French Canadians. While this comparison may not have helped their cause, particularly with Anglo-Canadians, it certainly draws attention to the rhetorical parameters commentators were willing to stretch in order to publicize a deep and profound injustice perpetrated by the Ontario provincial government and sanctioned by the Canadian state.

Conscription may have had its detractors, from western farmers to Wilfrid Laurier himself, but it was in Quebec and French-speaking communities outside that province that the idea of conscription was adamantly associated with repressive state functions and with outmoded attendance on Britain's Imperial causes. Riots in Montréal on May 24th, 1917, followed the mere suggestion made by Prime Minister Robert Borden on May 18th that conscription would be necessary. Unable to convince Laurier to join with him in a Union government to expedite conscription, Borden chose a more devious if politically astute method of gaining public approbation. His Solicitor General, Arthur Meighen, drafted a Military Voters Act relaxing voting regulations for enlisted men and allowing wives, widows, mothers, and sisters of soldiers and other military personnel to vote,<sup>5</sup> thereby expanding the base of support for the cause of conscription. <sup>6</sup> The passing of the Military Service Bill in 1917 could not have elicited a more discordant response. As Susan Mann Trofimenkoff notes, Bourassa likened the bill to "national suicide for a foreign cause," while *The Globe* "referred to conscription as fresh dedication to the cause of liberty" (389). Debate was so acrimonious that talk of Quebec's secession was broached in that province's legislature, but protest became more impassioned than even fiery rhetoric in the press could summon: three days of rioting in Quebec city in the Spring of 1918 was the most demonstrable evidence of discontent to date (Trofimenkoff 191). Carl Berger puts

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<sup>5</sup> An inadvertent and welcome gain for the suffrage movement, which helped pave the way for further gains in enfranchisement following the war.

<sup>6</sup> As described in Sprague 146.

the effects of this crisis most succinctly when he writes: “few events revealed the fragility of Canadian unity so dramatically as the conscription crisis of 1917” (vii).

By calling more attention to the French-Canadian side of this issue, I do not mean to suggest that the War itself was not a crisis, that there were no other dissenting voices against conscription, that not to address falling recruitment in some way would have been deeply disrespectful to those soldiers who had already lost their lives or those facing impending casualty, that Canada was the only country to enact conscription—indeed, Canada’s move followed that of many other nations. What I hope to provide is a sense of the widening crevasse between French and English Canada and an acknowledgement that, no matter how one defined one’s nationalism, a state apparatus and state functioning were proceeding apace. Regulation 17 and Conscription are only two highlights (or lowlights) of how such measures were experienced. Trofimenkoff provides an overview of these kinds of interventions when she states:

Justified by the war and facilitated by the War Measures Act, various controls from rationing to price fixing, from decrees against hoarding to those against loitering, probably overwhelmed the civil service more than anyone else, but they did indicate the state’s willingness to go beyond persuasion to actual coercion in directing the activities of its citizens. (388)

It is perhaps fitting that Racey’s cartoon of Miss Canada appeared so close on the heels of these historical crises, and in an Anglophone Montréal newspaper at that. Against such gaping disunity, she reads like a numinous cipher for a unified, integrated, national embodiment. This is the national identity that is delivered back to the viewer, in celebration of things remembered, in defiance of things forgotten. As a cultural representation, she must answer to those other historical representations coming to us in textual form from the realm of the “absent cause,” to borrow Althusser’s term for history. While allegory and myth can be held to account for the glossing of history and the adumbration of “state” in national cultural representations, the effect of de-naturalizing Miss Canada is to bring the hyphenated space into presence. She may look more freighted, and indeed complicated, than this alluring, ephemeral image at first allows.

As a postscript, I turn to another, idealized version of Miss Canada from the *Quebec Chronicle* in 1920 (figure #5) to show that the cartoon, “Evolution,” is not an isolated representation and to press the point that selective remembering and forgetting about World War I persisted beyond 1918. This allegorical Miss Canada will be recognizable enough in her dress and demeanor, but note the ways that the past has been exonerated and the future glorified: triumphant battles give way to vigorous industry. Again, mythic nature forecloses upon history and the state, paving the way for the forward progress of the nation.

#### Figures



Figure 1



**A PERTINENT QUESTION**

**MRS. BRITANNIA:** Is it possible, my dear, that you have ever given your cousin Jonathan any encouragement?

**MISS CANADA:** Encouragement! Certainly not, mamma. I have told him we can *never* be united.

Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

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