



A Canadian Journey **Conve** with Time

Peter Harcourt occupies a singular place among Canadian film critics. He is a late-blooming but still committed Canadian cultural nationalist. Yet he is also the author of a number of

justly well known books, such as *Six European Directors*, that deal with world cinema. Throughout the first sections of his new work, *A Canadian Journey: Conversations with Time*, he keeps mentioning the subject of film, as though seeking to justify the writing of a memoir. True, the autobiographies of film critics, much less of Canadian film critics, are rare. But his real topic is one that's quite familiar to his readers: the restrictive, desiccated, soul-destroying WASP childhood that is so common in the literature (and on the faces) of those who grew up in English Canada in certain circumstances more than a generation ago.

A Canadian Journey is a piece of evidence that could be studied usefully alongside the novels of Margaret Atwood, Graeme Gibson or Hugh Hood, the poetry of Dennis Lee, or the philosophy of George Grant. The subject has a relevance, an intimacy and a familiarity – that are comforting. Yet in Harcourt's handling, the theme leads to a feeling of strangeness, and to a sense of psychic wounds never properly healed, which can only be called disturbing.

Harcourt was born in Toronto in 1931 and was reared on College Street (but only until his father, a physician who had been wounded in the Great War, moved – as he did whenever a “Jew” or a “foreigner” settled in the neighbourhood). So the setting – growing up in the 1940s Toronto – provides a rewarding contrast with the poet Joe Rosenblatt's 1985 memoir *Escape from the Glue Factory* – and the inevitable conclusion that the two authors occupied different planets while being on the same streets at the same time.

Like some early experiment to be looked at with interest only now, Harcourt's childhood unfolded in a household where females had all the authority. What with his mother, his aunt and especially his sister, he felt that he was witnessing “the spectacle of a man attempting to assert his authority in this matriarchal space to which he didn't belong.” This might (should) have freed him creatively and emotionally. Instead, it “etched a picture of the pathetic stupidity of the male” that was difficult to overcome, though he tried various cures, including tranquillizers. “I was on phe-

nobarbital by the time I was 10,” he writes, “and have been on something similar ever since.”

Harcourt was educated at the University of Toronto, worked at the Stratford Festival during its first season (1953) and then, like so many others of his day and class, went to Britain. At Cambridge, he studied under the famous literary critic F.R. Leavis, who taught him that fine writing, in Harcourt's words, “was less important in itself than as a indication of moral health, both in the individual writer and in society as a whole.” He goes on: “Before long, I was to champion similar values within film – initially addressing myself to the

great European masters like Renoir, Buñuel and Bergman but eventually to the emergence of Canadian film.”

In 1967 – “a wonderful time for film and a terrible time for marriages” – Harcourt was hired by George Whalley, the remarkable polymath of so many people's affectionate memories, to teach film studies in the English department at Queen's University in Kingston, Ont. Soon he created his own film department and persuaded such people as Robin Wood and Peter Morris to join.

Harcourt calls the early period in Kingston “the happiest I had ever known.” Indeed, he describes the famously hate-filled little city, the one whose sheer mean-spiritedness Robertson Davies has spent much of his imaginative life trying to bring to justice, as a sweet idyllic place. “Kingston provided the symbolic fulfilment of my conditioning as a pseudo-gentleman,” he writes. “Although I didn't go to Ridley College (as his antecedents had done), I did get to Cambridge and I did land a most prestigious appointment at Queen's University,” and he felt he was finally overcoming the WASP inability to make

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEX NEUMANN

a fuss: the awful last remnant of the once-proud Loyalist culture now trapped inside his genetic make-up. "My parents should have been proud of me. Of course they weren't." Nonetheless, he considers his work at Queen's "one of the finest things I have achieved – more than my books, more than all my other cultural activities."

But in 1974 he moved to York University in Toronto, then in 1978 to Carleton in Ottawa. By that time he found himself "waging war against the increasingly dominant fashion of French film theory." He lost. He went out of style, and, like so many other film critics his age, felt he had to stop writing because the younger generation of critics had been taught intolerance of any impressionist tendencies whatsoever that might dilute pure formalist thinking. France giveth; France taketh away. The irony makes this sad book even sadder.

Seldom can an English writer have conveyed so well the feelings of cultural listlessness, isolation, even desolation, which were the inevitable downside (but hardly the whole story) of the old Anglo-dominated culture.

He writes: "Whatever the source of this [spiritual and psychological] emptiness, I have come to recognize that this feeling was also cultural. Having no sense of myself as a Canadian, I had no sense of myself as a person."

Which is as succinct a rationale as I can ever remember seeing for Canadian cultural nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s, a movement that was even more important as a sensibility. This book (despite all its editing errors – there are no apostrophes in *Finnegans Wake* or *Simpsons*) should have permanent value as a document of those times ●

Douglas Fetherling is a Toronto poet, writer and visual artist. His books on film include DOCUMENTS IN CANADIAN FILM, THE CROWDED DARKNESS and THE FIVE LIVES OF BEN HECHT.



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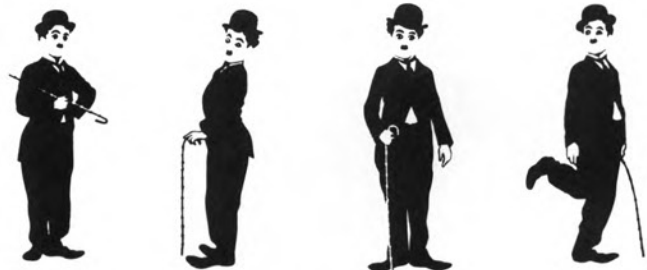
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