

The background of the book cover is a stylized, layered representation of the United States flag. It features broad, wavy stripes in shades of red, pink, and white. In the lower-left corner, there is a dark blue field containing numerous small, five-pointed stars in a reddish-pink color. The overall aesthetic is graphic and textured, with visible brushstrokes or paper grain.

# Prejudice and Pride

Canadian Intellectuals Confront  
the United States, 1891–1945

**DAMIEN-CLAUDE BÉLANGER**

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## PREJUDICE AND PRIDE

Canadian Intellectuals Confront the United States, 1891–1945

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## PREJUDICE AND PRIDE

Canadian Intellectuals Confront the United States, 1891–1945





# Introduction

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'The average Canadian attitude towards the United States and all things American cannot be permanently based upon pride and prejudice, or, to use one word, ignorance,' warned Douglas Bush (1896–1983) in 1929.<sup>1</sup> Bush, who would spend most of his career teaching English at Harvard University, was part of a new and, some believed, irreverent generation of thinkers who came of age during the Great War and dominated English Canadian discourse during the 1920s and 1930s. Rejecting the imperialism that had largely permeated Canadian thought before the First World War, these intellectuals sought to affirm the inherently American nature of Canadian society and to draw the nation out of Britain's orbit. This implied a redefinition of the Canadian experience and a rapprochement between Canada and its neighbour to the south.

There was nothing exceptionally novel in the outlook of this continentalist cohort. Many of its arguments had been plainly stated a generation before by the *bête noire* of Canadian imperialists, Goldwin Smith (1823–1910). Indeed, when it comes to the United States and the issue of Canadian-American relations, Canadian thought and writing has been characterized by a great deal of continuity: the broad ideas and sensibilities that emerged in the late eighteenth century are still with us today. This is scarcely surprising, since the various questions surrounding the Canadian-American relationship are existential for Canada. From the time of the American Revolution, Canada's writers and intellectuals have pondered the extent to which Canadian and American society differ. They have also argued over just how close Canada's relationship with the United States should be. These issues have generated a torrent of prose. Most Canadian intellectuals have published some

material related to the United States and Canadian-American relations and a number of Canada's most significant works, including Goldwin Smith's *Canada and the Canadian Question* (1891), Edmond de Nevers' *L'Avenir du peuple canadien-français* (1896), and George Grant's *Lament for a Nation* (1965), have dealt in some way with the 'American question.'

This prose has, in turn, generated a good deal of scholarly interest. By and large, scholars have focused their attention on anti-American sentiment in Canada.<sup>2</sup> The general consensus surrounding this writing is fairly straightforward: anti-Americanism is viewed as a facet of Canadian nationalism and an expression of the nation's struggle to maintain its sovereignty and distinctiveness.<sup>3</sup> Carl Berger's writing is typical of this perspective. In *The Sense of Power* (1970), he argues that imperialism was a form of Canadian nationalism and that a vigorous critique of the American republic was a key ingredient of that nationalism. Indeed, he writes, 'what lay behind this Canadian critique of the United States was not malevolence but nationalism.'<sup>4</sup>

Most of the scholars who have examined anti-Americanism have regarded it as essentially harmful to both the Canadian mind and the Canadian-American relationship. J.L. Granatstein is fairly representative of this attitude. 'With all its hatred, bias, and deliberately contrived fearmongering, anti-Americanism ... never was and never could become the basis of any rational national identity,' he writes in *Yankee Go Home?* (1996). Granatstein's monograph is the most comprehensive study of Canadian anti-Americanism published to date. It links anti-Americanism to nationalism, but also points out its more instrumental side: 'anti-Americanism was almost always employed as a tool by Canadian political and economic élites bent on preserving or enhancing their power. It was largely the Tory way of keeping pro-British attitudes uppermost in the Canadian psyche.'<sup>5</sup>

By and large, the anti-American tradition has not generated a significant historical debate in English-speaking Canada. In contrast, as a political ideal, the continentalist tradition has led to some debate.<sup>6</sup> The prevalent attitude within English Canada's intellectual and academic community is to dismiss continentalism as an anti-nationalist and indeed menacing doctrine. By the 1960s, writes Reginald C. Stuart, 'continentalism acquired a musty, quaint, anachronistic, even sinister quality to those who now asserted that Canada was rather too much like, and too peaceful toward, the American neighbor.'<sup>7</sup> The handful of the scholars who have seriously studied the continentalist impulse have sought

to counter this impression. Continentalist intellectuals, they argue, have traditionally sought to harness American wealth and power to strengthen the Canadian nation. Indeed, in the continentalist perspective, closer Canadian-American relations were viewed, notes Allan Smith, as 'perfectly compatible with – and would indeed serve – Canadian survival.'<sup>8</sup> Continentalism, therefore, was not an anti-nationalist doctrine.

In Quebec, the scholarship surrounding late nineteenth and early twentieth century intellectual attitudes towards the United States has often sought to understand the dichotomy between elite and popular attitudes regarding America.<sup>9</sup> It is widely assumed that anti-Americanism was rampant among the province's elite, while the rest of the population held a more positive view of the United States. Like in English Canadian scholarship, anti-American rhetoric in Quebec is assumed to be an expression of nationalism.

More recent work on the intellectual history of Quebec-U.S. relations has been centred on the concept of *américanité*. According to Yvan Lamonde, who initiated the historical profession to the concept in the 1980s, Quebec's history has been marked by a long struggle between those who embraced the province's *américanité* and those who rejected it. *Américanité* refers to Quebec's fundamentally American nature, to its Americanness, and should not, insists Lamonde, be confused with Americanization. From the mid-nineteenth century until after the Second World War, the bulk of Quebec's intellectuals would reject the province's *américanité*. 'The faithfulness of these élites to a largely imaginary past,' writes Gérard Bouchard, whose recent work has also explored Quebec's *américanité*, 'served as an action plan for future generations, with the memory of their origins being substituted for the excitement of the North American dream.'<sup>10</sup> As a result, the bulk of Quebec's elite was out of step with both the populace and the continent's wider ethos of rupture and renewal.<sup>11</sup>

The present book differs from previous research in three significant ways. To begin with, it examines and compares the intellectual discourse of both English and French Canada.<sup>12</sup> Earlier work on the subject has tended to focus on a single language group. Next, this study is more concerned with Canadian intellectuals as thinkers on the left, the right, and the centre than as nationalists or non-nationalists.<sup>13</sup> Most significantly, however, it argues that late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century intellectual discourse regarding American life and the Canadian-American relationship was not simply an expression of

nationalism or a reaction to United States foreign or commercial policy. Rather, it was primarily the expression of wider attitudes concerning modernity.<sup>14</sup>

Modernity is a complex concept whose multiple dimensions are difficult to circumscribe. Above all, it entails the erosion of traditional values and practices and the rise of mass society. Modernity is expressed on three basic levels. At the technical level, it is tied to industrialization and the technological advances of the industrial era. The emergence of industrial society, the proletariat, and mass production are fundamental to the modern ethos, as are large-scale urbanization, mechanization, and mass communications. These technological advances were undoubtedly the most tangible expressions of modernity. Indeed, during the period under study, the industrial metropolis, the automobile, and the radio were all powerful symbols of a new age. The technological aspects of modernity marginalize traditional modes of production.

At the philosophical and intellectual level, modernity is tied to a strong faith in science and technology and in the illimitable progress of society. Unlike traditionalism, which is a theocentric doctrine, modernity is anthropocentric. It seeks to affirm the central place of man in the universe and does not view material considerations as inevitably subordinate to spiritual ones. Modernity is not necessarily an atheistic sensibility, but it is invariably tied to some form of secularism. 'Hunched over the present while at the same time constantly focusing on what will overtake it, on its own negation,' writes Alexis Nouss, 'modernity has nothing to learn from the past.'<sup>15</sup> The modern ethos is obsessed with change and newness. As a result, it invariably leads to a penchant for rupture and, in some cases, to outright revolutionism. Politically, it can lean towards either democracy or totalitarianism, but in both instances it will invariably corrode the power of traditional elites, particularly that of the clergy.

Lastly, at the cultural level, modernity is tied to mass culture and mass consumption. Its rise signals the erosion of both traditional and elite culture and the rise of urban leisure. Culture becomes a commodity that is sold or broadcast to the masses. Modernity also progressively emancipates art and literature from traditional notions of aesthetics, propriety, and utility. The notion that art can exist for its own sake is an expression of the modern ethos. Modernity is a powerful and revolutionary force. It spawns new social groups and new forms of expression. In doing so, it produces a cultural and status revolution that overwhelms tradition and erodes established social relations and customs.

Along with Great Britain, the United States played a key role in the conceptual universe of the Canadian intellectual. Both nations were generally represented as antithetical archetypes: Britain embodied tradition and conservative values, while the United States came to symbolize modernity and the liberal ethos.<sup>16</sup> America represented both the promise and the dangers of the mass age. 'The United States is dealing with some of those great social and economic problems which, if not altogether peculiar to the great democracy of the West, seem to be more acute there than elsewhere,' wrote James Cappon (1855–1939) in 1912. Born in Scotland, Cappon had immigrated to Canada in 1888 to teach English at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. Regarding the United States, he worried, as did most Canadian imperialists, that 'the problems which are theirs to-day may be ours to-morrow.'<sup>17</sup> Indeed, America has long presented a vision of the future, albeit a blurred one, to the intellectuals of the world.<sup>18</sup>

In the Dominion of Canada, as elsewhere in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, democracy, urban and industrial society, mass culture, and secularism – in a word, modernity – became increasingly identified with the United States. Consequently, resistance to modernity was expressed, in part, through anti-American rhetoric, while faith in the mass age was expressed, again in part, through continentalism. The dialectic between these two sensibilities was a struggle involving two different understandings of Canada, one of which was fundamentally antimodern.

The tension between continentalist and anti-American sentiment emerged during the crucible of Canadian discourse – the American Revolution – when rebel and loyalist elements struggled for the very soul of the Province of Quebec. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Canadian hostility to the United States and continental integration was expressed in two conservative discourses: English Canadian imperialism and French Canadian nationalism. Despite their fundamental divergence on the national question, both imperialists and *nationalistes* shared an essentially antimodern outlook, and anti-Americanism was their logical point of convergence. Continentalism was expressed in liberal and socialist discourse. Liberals and socialists tended to diverge on issues related to freedom, equality, and property, but they generally agreed on the opportunities that continental integration would bring to Canada.

Anti-Americanism was largely present in the discourse of English and French Canadian intellectuals from the early 1890s to the Great

War. By the 1920s, however, continentalism became increasingly common in the work of English Canadian intellectuals. Clearly, the era of Andrew Macphail (1864–1938), Stephen Leacock (1869–1944), and the conservative *University Magazine* had come to an end, and the era of Frank Underhill (1885–1971), F.R. Scott (1899–1985), and the left-of-centre *Canadian Forum* had begun. Though several English Canadian thinkers continued to denounce the United States, an emerging generation of progressive intellectuals embraced modernity and continentalism. In French Canada, the process was quite different. The anti-Americanism that had dominated the prewar generation of intellectuals was renewed and reinforced in the 1920s and 1930s as a new cohort of conservative thinkers led by abbé Lionel Groulx (1878–1967) stiffened the resistance to modernity and America that had characterized many of their precursors. French Canadian continentalism, by contrast, grew increasingly marginal.

English and French Canadian intellectuals shared common preoccupations with respect to the United States. However, the tone and emphasis of their commentary often differed. In English Canada, where political institutions and the imperial bond were viewed as the mainstays of Canadian distinctiveness, writing on the United States tended to deal primarily with political and diplomatic issues. In Quebec, where political institutions were not generally viewed as vital elements of national distinctiveness, social and cultural affairs dominated writing on the United States. Anti-American rhetoric tended to be more radical in French Canada, but it was also less prevalent in French Canadian discourse than in English Canadian writing.

The period under study begins in 1891 – a significant year in the intellectual history of Canadian-American relations. One of the most momentous federal elections in Canadian history – and Sir John A. Macdonald's last – was held in March of that year. The election pitted an ailing Macdonald and his National Policy against a youthful Wilfrid Laurier and his promises of unrestricted reciprocity with the United States. The old chieftain prevailed. The campaign revolved around anti-Americanism and, in a pattern that would be repeated time and again in Canadian politics, anti-American rhetoric was used by the Conservatives to attack their Liberal opponents.<sup>19</sup> The Tories had successfully portrayed the election not as a contest between free trade and protectionism, but as a mortal struggle pitting the forces of loyalty against those of treason. The campaign galvanized English Canadian imperialists. In effect, the

challenge posed by the advocates of unrestricted reciprocity, commercial union, and annexation in the late 1880s and early 1890s had given Canadian imperialism its *raison d'être*.

The 1891 election also produced one of the most important Canadian works of non-fiction: Goldwin Smith's best-selling *Canada and the Canadian Question*. Its publication stands out as one of the key moments in Canadian intellectual history. In a sense, *Canada and the Canadian Question* was English Canada's Durham Report. The irreverent essay argued that the Dominion of Canada was a geographic, ethnic, economic, and political absurdity whose ultimate destiny lay in political union with the United States. Smith had rejected almost every principle held by nineteenth-century Canadian imperialists, and much in the same way that the indignation generated by Lord Durham's infamous report sparked an intellectual and literary explosion in French Canada, *Canada and the Canadian Question* generated a similar torrent of nation-affirming prose in English Canada. According to Carl Berger, Smith's book 'is supremely important in Canadian nationalist thought because he asked the question which all Canadian nationalists have since tried to answer: what positive values does the country embody and represent that justifies her existence?'<sup>20</sup>

*Canada and the Canadian Question* had actually been written as a campaign document for the Liberal party – Smith endorsed reciprocity – but failed in this purpose since it was not off the press until April 1891.<sup>21</sup> Rabidly anti-Catholic and francophobic, the book was the product of a deeply pessimistic time. Less than twenty-five years after the British North America Act was passed, Canada was suffering from a profound malaise. The enthusiasm generated by Confederation had been battered by economic depression and washed away by a torrent of ethnic, religious, and sectional strife. To make matters worse, emigration to the United States was undermining Canada's population growth, and annexationism, that unmistakable sign of national despair, reared its ugly head for one final encore. Clearly, some Canadians shared Smith's profound defeatism. As the nation lurched from recession to recession, it became clear that the National Policy had not delivered on its promises of prosperity.

There was, however, some light at the end of the tunnel. A few years after Smith's indictment of Canada, the nation was enjoying rapid economic expansion and a period of unbridled optimism under the stewardship of Sir Wilfrid Laurier and his 'sunny ways.' The next decades would witness the birth of a new independent, urban, and in-

dustrial Canada. By the late 1890s, Canada had shaken off a decade of pessimism and discord and had begun to grow as never before. 'The poor relation has come into her fortune,' wrote British observer J.A. Hobson at the turn of the century.<sup>22</sup> Between 1901 and 1945, emigration ebbed, immigration soared, and Canada's population nearly tripled. In addition, rapid, though at times intermittent, industrial growth brought the nation's urbanization rate from 35 to 59 per cent. Industrial expansion also fuelled the rise of consumerism which, in turn, helped to homogenize North American lifestyles.

The Dominion of Canada emerged from the Great War a nation transformed. Canadian independence had been consecrated at Vimy and Versailles and the nation was taking its first steps on the world stage. Continental integration was proceeding apace: American investments in Canada grew rapidly as Britain's decline in the years after the First World War pushed Canada into the arms of the United States, and American mass culture displaced British popular culture in Canada.<sup>23</sup> 'Like all the great empires before it,' writes Stephen Brooks, 'America had begun to export its culture – its values, lifestyles, dreams, and self-image – through what were then the new media of film and mass advertising,' and had proven her mastery of the mass age.<sup>24</sup> By the end of the Second World War, the United States was fully poised to assume its new role as a global superpower. All the pieces were now in place: America had become a military, economic, and cultural powerhouse. America's symbolic significance would shift accordingly. In post-Second World War Canada, anti-American rhetoric would become increasingly identified with the left and would gradually cease to express a distaste for modernity.

This study explores the intellectual history of Canadian-American relations through an extensive corpus of fiction and non-fiction. It does not focus on specific events like, for instance, the Spanish-American War or the New Deal. Instead, the study offers a thematic examination of Canadian viewpoints on a variety of issues ranging from American forms of freedom to cross-border migration. This thematic method avoids some of the pitfalls of more biographical or event-based methods of intellectual history, which often neglect the internal dynamics of discourse and the continuity of ideas over time.<sup>25</sup> Major quotations are included in the text to illustrate the nature and evolution of Canadian commentary. Quotes were generally selected for inclusion based on their representativeness, though many quotations were also included



to illustrate atypical discourse. To facilitate comprehension, French-language quotes have been translated into English. The original quotes can be found in the endnotes.

The intellectuals whose work is examined in these pages were essentially cultural figures – most intellectuals in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Canada could be found in the academic community, in journalism, or in the ranks of the clergy – who became involved in sociopolitical debate without directly entering the world of partisan politics.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, as S.E.D. Shortt notes, ‘rather than actively participating in politics, they preferred to confine themselves to critical observations in academic journals or membership in quasi-clandestine organizations, a tradition beginning with the Canada Firsters, carried on by the Round Table Groups, and culminating in the League for Social Reconstruction.’<sup>27</sup> Many of the radicals involved in the League, in particular Frank Underhill, F.R. Scott, Edgar McInnis (1899–1973), and King Gordon (1900–1989), are good examples of the *intellectuel engagé* whose action lies somewhere between the cultural and political spheres. This grey zone is the realm of the intellectual.

For the purposes of this study, intellectuals were considered Canadian if they were born in Canada and received the greater part of their education there, or if they immigrated and settled permanently in the Dominion. As a result, work by expatriate intellectuals who showed a sustained interest in Canadian affairs throughout their careers was examined. Indeed, exiled authors like John Bartlet Brebner (1895–1957) or Edmond de Nevers (1862–1906) were full participants in the development of Canadian discourse and played a key role in disseminating American ideas north of the border.

The present study rests on a corpus of over 500 texts written by Canadian intellectuals between 1891 and 1945. Texts were selected for inclusion in the study’s corpus if they contained a substantive discussion of American life or Canada’s relationship with the United States. Not surprisingly, given that the ‘American question’ has played a key role in Canadian discourse since the late eighteenth century, several of the most influential Canadian books published between 1891 and 1945 can be found in this study’s corpus. Works of fiction account for roughly 5 per cent of the corpus.

The study’s corpus was intended to be comprehensive, not exhaustive. It contains work written by most of the era’s prominent intellectuals and offers a cross-section of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Canadian discourse. In all, work by over 250 authors was