

M Historical Commentary

The Medicine Line and the Thin Red Line

by Frits Pannekoek

The Medicine Line, the name given by the Blackfoot to the Canadian-American border, reflects the “magic” that it imposes on certain people. How can similar peoples sharing the same continent be so different when divided by the “Medicine Line”? There is also another interpretation of the border. Many Canadians see it as a thin red line: the 49th parallel protects their rather fragile culture from unimaginable incursions from the south.

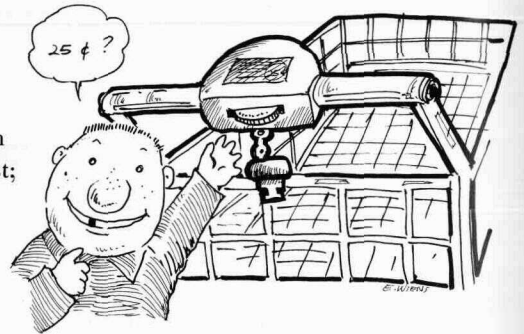
Canadians spend a great deal of their time on that most beloved topic—the differences between Canadians and Americans. Virtually every university has a course on Canadian-American relations. There are countless books on the subject. Canadians spend more time with a Molson arguing over the differences between Canadians and Americans than they spend debating the merits of their various hockey clubs.

In the summer of 1994 I was sent to Helena on an exchange with the Montana Historical Society. This four-week swap involving two people from each agency was funded by the American government through the American Association of Museums and by the Canadian government through the Canadian Museums Association. The exchanges took place in 1994 and included Glenn Matich, manager of Alberta’s southern

historic sites; myself; Kathryn Otto, Montana State Archivist; and Patty McLaughlin, Montana’s senior heritage preservation officer.

Two years earlier, the Historic Sites Service, of which I am director, and the Montana Historical Society decided that given their close proximities, it would be worthwhile to get to know each other better. The exchange has been successful beyond our original expectations, and together we are currently planning a major international exhibition on the culture surrounding the horse, a subject that unites us.

My visit to Helena gave me four weeks to observe American society directly, particularly that of a state whose history and people have such strong connections with Alberta. My American colleagues told me there are really no differences between Americans and Canadians, and even if there were a few, there certainly were no discernible differences between Montanans and Albertans. When pressed, however, they came up with a few distinctions, but not ones they thought substantial. I was told that our



The 25¢ shopping buggy conspiracy

“pronunciations are British.” This observation always irritates Canadians, who feel their pronunciations are, of course, Canadian. Words like “out, about, schedule, again, and roof” were most frequently cited. They also mentioned the uniqueness of the Canadian commercial landscape. Canada has fewer and different banks and fewer and different department stores. Their signage gives Canada a unique feel in the otherwise internationally franchised landscape of the golden arches. There is also the shopping “buggy” children’s subculture. Alberta has a twenty-five cent deposit on shopping carts, and there are always groups of children eagerly waiting to return your cart for the quarter. Some Montanans asked me how could we put up with the British Queen—and why did we not have



Rejecting the American Revolution, Canadians embraced the “caring and nurturing” monarchy.



Americans believe they are simply being honest and tell it like it is.



Canadians are polite. Too polite. You never know exactly what they are thinking.

our own government? The answer is complex, but to a country built on the principles of evolution rather than revolution, the quaint trappings of the past hardly seem the burden of tyranny. Others admitted a few additional superficial differences but argued they were a product of differing political structures, not differences rooted in culture.

Above all I was repeatedly told that even if there were differences, the differences between Montana and the eastern United States, and Alberta and eastern Canada, were surely greater than the differences between Montana and Alberta. There was an obvious cultural sameness. Perhaps Canadians were a bit too reticent, too polite—indeed, the word “boring” slipped out. I gather that one of the state historical society staff, who drew the short straw for assignment to the frozen north as part of the Alberta/Montana exchange, was worried that she would be bored in

Canada and so took a carload of work along. I gather little of the work got done. At least they proved Irving Layton, one of Canada’s leading poets, wrong. Layton said Canadians were “a dull people, without charm or ideas” who had “settled into the clean empty look of a Mountie or dairy farmer.”¹

In Canada, we are constantly told by the media that we are a special people with a unique heritage and a distinct national identity. Our national identity is so loosely defined, however, that no one really agrees what we are or what we believe in. But we are emphatically taught that we are unique. Our nationality is always defined in relation to that of the United States. So we know what we are not, not what we are, and we are emphatically not Americans. Canadians are a northern people; Americans are a southern people.² The settlement of Canada’s West

was peaceful; the settlement of America’s was violent.³ Canadians believe in the importance of the state; Americans believe in the importance of the individual. Canadians are silent; Americans are gregarious. Canada is boring; the United States is exciting. Canada has three founding cultures; America has one. America is a country that exists because of its geography; Canada exists to spite its.⁴ America’s psyche is dominated by its position as a world power; Canada’s is dominated by its self-image as a victim.⁵

Canadians generally argue they are so different because Canada’s founding peoples (and founding peoples would include French Canadians, English Canadians, and aboriginal Canadians) rejected the American Revolution. They rejected the Revolution because it gave too much power to the “vulgar herd”—to the mob. Canadians instead believed in and wished to retain a structured hierarchical society in which individuals knew their place, their responsibilities, and their obligations. Authority in Canada comes from above, not from below. Those who are more generously endowed with either material, spiritual, or intellectual goods have an obligation to share these with those less fortunate. Most important, Canadians oblige their government to accept responsibility to act for the greater public good. Some will argue that this philosophy is too subtle, the self-serving argument of a threatened cultural elite. Whatever it is that makes Canada distinct, many

1. F. R. Scott and A. J. M. Smith, *The Blasted Pine: An Anthology of Satire, Invective and Disrespectful Verse, Chiefly by Canadian Writers* (Toronto, 1957).

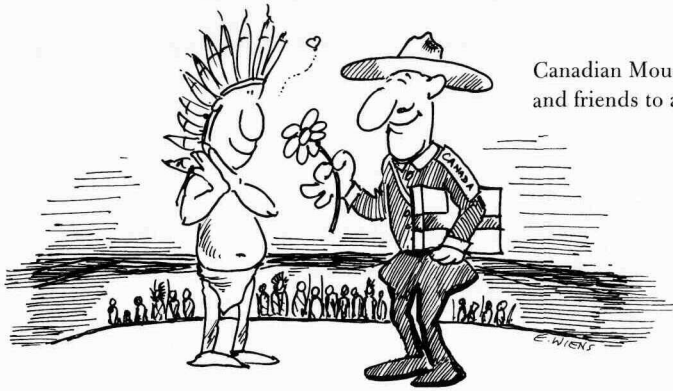
2. W. L. Morton, *The Canadian Identity* (Madison, Wis., 1961). Morton argues that Canada’s distinctive culture and politics are due to its northernness and that Canada’s deferential nature stems from its political organization as a monarchy.

3. R. C. Macleod, *The North West Mounted Police and Law Enforcement 1873–1905* (Toronto, 1976); Hugh Dempsey, *Men in Scarlet* (Toronto, 1974). Both authors argue that the settlement of the Canadian West was more peaceful than that of the United States.

4. Harold Adam Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History* (New Haven, Conn., 1930). Innis argues that Canada was

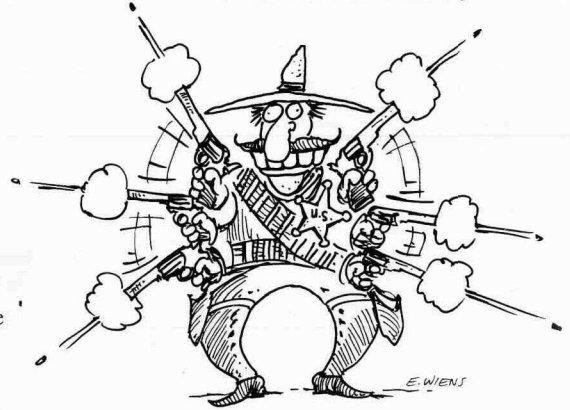
created because of its geography, not in spite of it. Many scholars agree, but will argue that in any case they created the nation to spite its harsh climate and the Canadian Shield.

5. Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto, 1972). One of Canada’s most famous authors suggests that Canada, like leading characters who play out their roles as victims, behaves in a similar fashion.



Canadian Mounties were peaceful and friends to all the Indians.

U.S. gunslingers cleared the West with their own brand of justice.



believe that our hierarchical and organic society has been and continues to be under constant threat from the anarchy of individualism that is the United States. This American cultural trait, whether it was carried like some contagion by the American immigrant seeking new land in Ontario in 1818, by the immigrant to Alberta in 1920, or by the pervasive American media presence, is seen as worrisome. The sanctity of the individual, which we in Canada see as so very American, threatens, in the minds of some, to thoroughly permeate and undermine Canada's culture. The threat is particularly serious in Alberta, which was largely settled by Americans, even though through most of its history, the province's political culture has always been dominated by Ontarian immigrants who are so infused with the principles of monarchy.⁶

These observations may seem farfetched and implausible. But perhaps the Canadian tendency to nurture the role of the state, and the Canadian willingness to accept greater state intervention in their day-to-day lives, explains Canada's medicare system, its government-supported social safety net, and the partnership of government and business.

The question here is this: How does Canada's distinct sense of self translate into distinct cultural and heritage policies? In an organic hierarchical society there should be greater state presence and direction in government heritage policy. On the surface this seems to be so. Some Montanans argue that Alberta has spent considerably more money on heritage preservation than has Montana. Certainly if state or provincial government expenditures are the measure, the Alberta provincial government seems to have a much greater commitment to heritage preservation and cultural tourism than does the state government. This is only an illusion. There is no real difference in heritage funding on a per capita basis if all private sector and government resources are included. It could be proven that Montanans probably spend only slightly less per capita on heritage

than do Albertans. All expenditures on heritage in Alberta are approximately \$10 to \$12 per capita. Are expenditures per capita any less in Montana if one considers private sector funds; state budgets relating to the Montana Historical Society, various state parks with heritage attractions, and university museums like the Museum of the Rockies; and most important, federal agency expenditures?

The apparent differences result from the unique leadership role Canadian society assigns to government. It only seems that Albertans have devoted more resources to the preservation of their heritage because these resources are more visible publicly. The province has an agency, the Cultural Facilities and Historical Resources Division of the Department of Community Development, that manages eighteen historical facilities valued

Montana: Heritage homes, mansions, and very large open pits



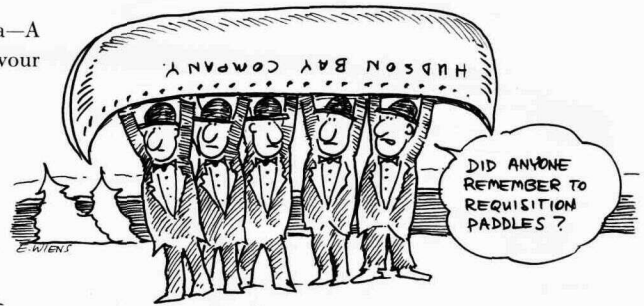
6. George Grant, *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* (Toronto, 1965). Grant develops this argument to its full extent.

in excess of \$200 million and a foundation, the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation, that supports private sector and nonprofit activities with grants valued at approximately \$2 million per year. The eighteen historical facilities range from major institutions like the Royal Tyrrell Museum, the Provincial Museum, the Reynolds-Alberta Museum of industry, transportation and agriculture, interpretation centers like Head Smashed In Buffalo Jump and Frank Slide to mansion museums like Rutherford House, the home of the first Premier of Alberta. The foundation provides support grants to the Alberta Museums Association, several heritage main streets, and more than 200 owners of designated historic structures.

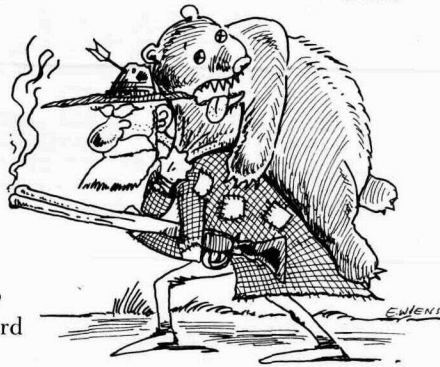
In Montana, property rights and individualism dictate a lesser degree of coordination and cooperation at one government level. Rather, the role is divided among the various levels of government, and there is a considerably greater, although uncoordinated, involvement by the private and not-for-profit sector. In Montana funding is dispersed throughout several state departments, local governments, and federal departments and agencies. In Alberta, Provincial Parks has a minimal heritage presence; in Montana state funding is significant. In Alberta the federal government has virtually no presence; in Montana the federal government's role is key to the preservation movement.

In Canada the provinces control public lands, property rights, and subsurface resources. This means that any meaningful preservation programmes that affect individual property rights must be provincial. The province even has certain taxing powers that could affect

The fur trade in Canada—A corporate endeavour



The fur trade in the U.S.—lone, rugged, gun-totin' mountain men



heritage projects and programmes, but these have been assigned to the federal government under a complex set of negotiations. Given the reality of Quebec, the Canadian constitution tends to acknowledge provincial jurisdiction over cultural matters. The Canadian federal government is left to deal with those few sites of national significance that it can acquire in the market place, and those on federal lands. So in the search for cultural life, the provincial government has no choice but to assume a paramount role.

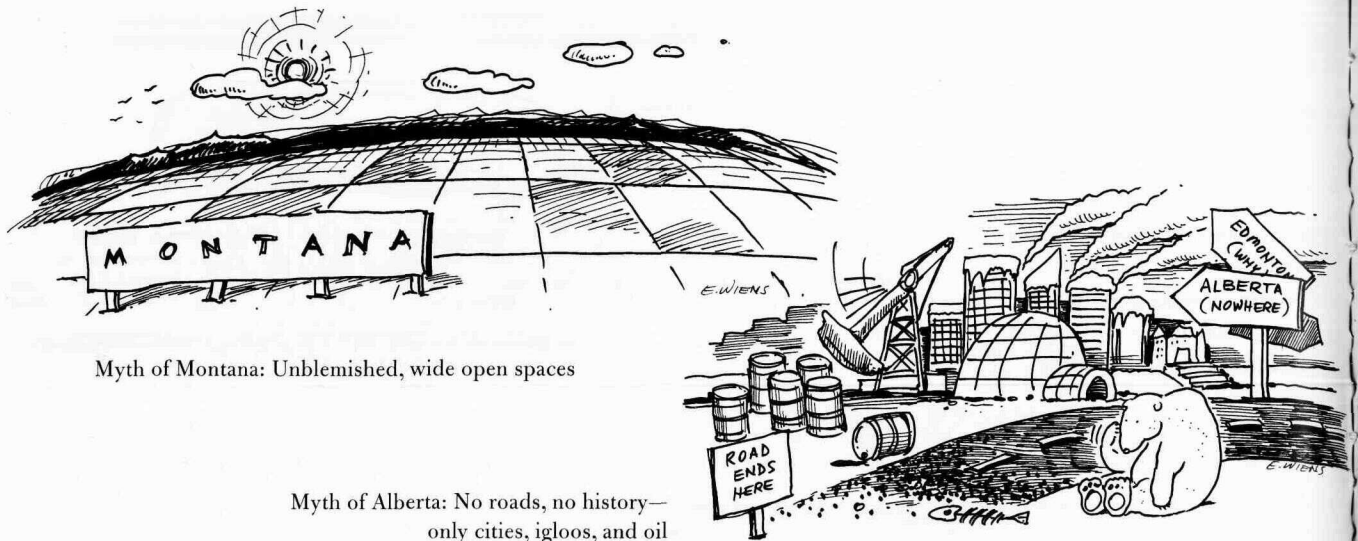
In Montana the federal government has a much greater presence, with its own significant heritage staff sprinkled throughout a number of agencies. It owns 30 percent of the state's land base and controls many heritage decisions through grants for sometimes totally unrelated activities, such as highways. These grants can only be accessed if certain heritage preservation or mitigation activities are undertaken.⁷

In Montana I noticed a great individual awareness of America's

7. James J. Lopach, ed., *We the People of Montana: The Workings of a Popular Government* (Missoula, Mont., 1983), 279.

heritage but a very muted celebration of Montana's past. There is such confidence in being American and in being a Montanan that there is no real need to seek and define meaning. American national symbols and myths are so powerful that they seem to mute the need for community and state to create identities through preservation of the past. Communities not only accept the national myths, they reinforce them. Montana is seen as the last wild West, the last great frontier, the space where the individual can exercise his freedoms free from the tyranny of neighbours and government. I wonder whether some of Montana's rich heritage assets are neglected because they do not directly contribute to this myth. To me Montana is a complex state with an equally complex history with subtle textures and remains. Helena, for example, has a collection of heritage buildings that are unsurpassed in western Canada. Montana's native history is among the most important in North America. There seems a particular denial of the industrial past. Butte is probably one of the most important historical resources in North America, possibly the world. The great Berkeley Pit provided the copper that electrified the world.

Canada for its part has few symbols. The crests of the Old Dominion are gone, and the visual identity of the various provinces are often more the creation of an ad man's imagination than a cultural reality. There is the maple leaf flag,



Myth of Montana: Unblemished, wide open spaces

Myth of Alberta: No roads, no history—
only cities, igloos, and oil

but it was a product of debate, hardly the spontaneous product of any national affection. The toilsome bark-eating beaver hardly compares to the eagle in ferocity and image.

In the United States I also encountered a real and deeply held distrust of government. In this environment, federal or state agencies have to exercise their legal obligations with extreme care. Effective heritage or preservation initiatives can only succeed if initiated and totally funded at local levels. The C. M. Russell Museum in Great Falls; the Historical Museum at Fort Missoula; the Towe Ford Museum at Deer Lodge; the Museum of the Rockies in Bozeman; the house museums in Helena, Butte, and Bozeman; and the rehabilitations at Butte are all the results of community dedication. This approach has produced a rich and varied, yet fragile and uncoordinated, approach to heritage preservation. But it works. The heritage movement is strong in Montana: the state has more than 165 community museums, some supported out of the community tax base. There are nineteen state historic parks and two federal parks. All of these work indepen-

dently to achieve their own goals. The motto seems unrestricted competition rather than coordination.

The approach in Alberta is virtually opposite. While we have a strong community base, major projects are expected to be either partially funded or coordinated by government. The Harvie family, for example, who founded the Glenbow Museum in Calgary with a \$5 million endowment and a fabulous collection, expected the government to provide a building and a matching \$5 million, which it did. Canada and Alberta celebrated the centennial of confederation in 1967 by building the Provincial Museum of Alberta. In 1974 the province passed a powerful piece of legislation, the Historical Resources Act, which allowed the province to work with the development industry in the management of heritage resources. In the 1980s,

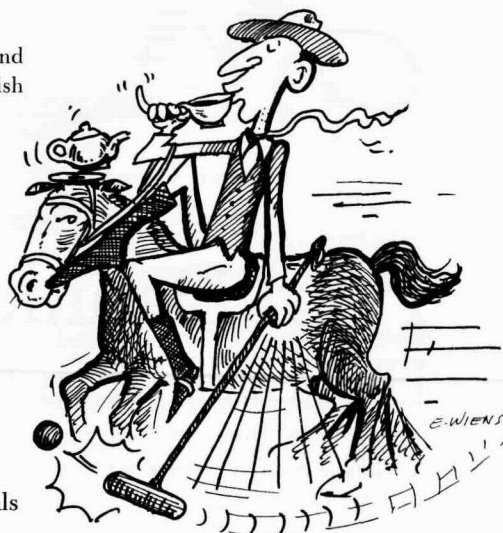
as tourism became increasingly critical to the economy of the province, and as the need for new Albertans to understand the province's past and their place in it grew, the state began to invest what would amount to more than \$120 million in heritage infrastructure development. These seventeen facilities are the focus of much recent attention.⁸

It should be emphasized that the Historical Resources Act was accompanied by considerable heritage activity at the community level. The province saw the community museum as the backbone of heritage commitment and provided the Alberta Museums Association, with its 240-plus member museums, with more than \$1 million annually. The larger cities in Alberta also provided support. Edmonton, Calgary, Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, and Red Deer, for example, all have reason-

Edmonton: A large city, with no reason to exist, clutching to the edge of the tundra.



Canadian ranching: Tea time and polo—very proper, very British



American ranching: Cowboys and showdowns



ably well-funded and community-supported local institutions or museums.

Nonetheless, there may not be all that much difference in funding levels for heritage in Montana and Alberta. There may have been some difference in capital expenditures in the last few years, but I am convinced that the total capital value of the heritage plant (both private and public) in Alberta, compared to the total capital value of the heritage plant (both private and public) in Montana, are equal if compared on a per capita basis. I am also convinced that the current operating costs for all heritage projects in Montana and Alberta, if prorated per capita, would be similar. Unfortunately precise comparisons are difficult to calculate, and the numbers will always be interpreted differently. Alberta has little federal presence in heritage and outside the national parks there is little federal crown

8. Fort Victoria, Fort George Buckingham House, Frank Slide, Leitch Collieries, Reynolds-Alberta Museum, the Provincial Museum of Alberta, Remington-Alberta Carriage Centre, the Fort McMurray Oil Sands Interpretive Centre, Rutherford House, Father Lacombe Chapel, Brooks Aqueduct, the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village, Stephansson House, Royal Tyrrell Museum, Royal Tyrrell Field Station, and Historic Dunvegan.

land. There is only one Alberta park—Writing on Stone—that deals with heritage. Alberta can trace heritage expenditures more effectively because of various grant and designation programmes. In Montana heritage is more passive, and much of the work is done by individuals without government support. Heritage is so much a part of the American soul that it is not readily traceable through public expenditures.

Yet I am repeatedly asked which system is the more effective. I don't believe that is the appropriate question. If each system delivers what its society wants then it is effective. I know some Montanans admire the provincial heritage plant. We Canadians admire your federal tax concession programme, the state archives, which is among the best in North America, and the Montana Historical Society's publications, which are the result of decades of commitment. I admire the dedication of the many people in Butte and Helena, for example, to making preservation a part of their everyday lives. Montana has shown Alberta that strength in heritage is something that must be rooted in individual consciousness, that it must be subtle, and that it will take several generations to root successfully. Canada's more statist model

works because it is rooted in Canada's traditions. It results in greater physical institutions, in larger edifices, but it reflects no greater or lesser a commitment by its citizens to the preservation of the past. M



Scottish guy with kilts—
a typical Albertan?

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