

My Country

To a stranger, the land must seem endless. A herring gull, winging its way from St. John's, Newfoundland to Victoria on the southern tip of Vancouver Island, will travel as far as the distance from London to Baghdad. It is the vastness that startles the imagination of all who visit my country .

Contrary to common belief, we do not live in snow-covered cabins far from civilization. Most of us inhabit cities that do not seem to differ greatly from those to the south of us. The observant visitor, however, will note some differences. The variety of our national makeup is, I believe, more pronounced than it is in the American melting pot. A newcomer in the United States quickly learns to cover up his or her origins and become an American. A newcomer to Canada manages to keep something of the culture and customs of his or her ethnic background.

Traditionally, the stranger has thought of Canada as a mountainous, snow-swept land. Certainly it can get very cold in Canada, Few non-Canadians understand that it can also get very hot. The eastern cities suffer in the humidity of July and August, and people actually die each year from the heat.

Where temperature is concerned we are a country of extremes; and yet, as a people, we tend toward moderation and even conservatism. Non-Canadians think we are the same as our American neighbors, but we are not really like the Americans. Our temperament, our social attitudes, our environment, and our history make us a different kind of North American.

First, there is the matter of our history. It has been called dull because it is not very bloody. We are, after all, the only people in all the Americas who did not separate violently from Europe. We have had three or four small uprisings but not revolution or civil war.

We were slow to give up our colonial ties to England. While the Americans chose freedom, we chose order. Our lawmen are appointed from above, not elect from below. The idea of choosing town marshals and county sheriffs by vote to keep the peace with guns never fitted into the Canadian scheme of things. Instead, we invented the North West Mounted Police. The Canadian symbol of the Mountie, neat and clean in his scarlet coat, contrasts with the American symbol of the lawman in his open shirt and gun-belt. The two differing social attitudes persist to this day. In the United states, the settlers moved across the continent before law-hence the "wild" west. In Canada, the law came first; settlement followed.

Outward displays of emotion are not part of the Canadian style. We are, after all, a northern people. The Americans are far more outgoing than we are. One reason for this, I think, is the very real presence of nature in our lives. Most of us live within a few hours' drive of the wilderness. No Canadian city is far removed from those mysterious and silent places that can have such an effect on the human soul.

There is another aspect of my country that makes it unique in the Americans, and that is our bilingual and multicultural makeup (Canada has two official languages, English and French, and in its largest province, a majority of the inhabitants speak French almost exclusively.) It gives us a picturesque quality, of course, and that certainly helps tourism: Visitors are attracted to the "foreignness" of Quebec City, with its twisting streets and its French-style cooking. But there is also a disturbing regional tension, Quebec has become a nation within a nation, and the separatist movement is powerful there.

Canadians are not anti-American. We watch American television programs. We tend to prefer American-made cars over the European and Asian products. We welcome hundreds of thousands of American tourists to our country every year and don't complain much when they tell us that we're exactly the same as they are.

Of course, we're not the same. But the visitor may be pardoned for thinking so when he or she first crosses the border. The building in our cities are designed in the international styles. The brand names in the supermarkets are all familiar. It is only after several days that the newcomer begins to sense a difference. He cannot put his finger on that difference, but then, neither can many of my fellow Canadians. The only thing we are really sure of is that we are not Americans.