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Calling the Kettle Black? Recent Trends and Strategies in the Study of the Canadian-American Relationship

BARLOW, Maude — *Too Close for Comfort: Canada's Future Within Fortress North America*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2005. Pp. 300.
KOHN, Edward P. — *A Kindred People: Canadian-American Relations & the Anglo-Saxon Idea, 1895–1903*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004. Pp. 254.
WRIGHT, Robert — *Virtual Sovereignty: Nationalism, Culture and the Canadian Question*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2004. Pp. 300.

THE WORLD has become boring. Most politicians, policy-makers, and academics agree that, at least for the time being, the United States has become the sole superpower on the planet. As the American influence grows, it predictably draws retribution from abroad, as do all dominant powers in their heyday. This ire includes much commentary from Canadians, many of whom have always been avid America-watchers. What is interesting about this round of gazing over the North American fence is that some Canadians are doing to the United States what they accuse the United States of doing to the rest of the world: reducing difference and diversity until there is only one version of reality left.

Three recent books, *Too Close for Comfort: Canada's Future Within Fortress North America* by Maude Barlow, *Virtual Sovereignty: Nationalism, Culture and the Canadian Question* by Robert Wright, and *A Kindred People: Canadian-American Relations & the Anglo-Saxon Idea, 1895–1903* by Edward P. Kohn, examine the relationship between Canada and the United States. While they make excellent points along the way and identify some genuinely troubling trends that may indeed present some intractable problems for Canada in the all-too-near future, both Barlow and Wright tend to oversimplify the demographic and political make-up of the United States, especially overlooking the nearly 50 per cent of Americans who actively continue to work against the current Republican government. As a result, they project an America with virtually no discourse, no resistance, and no internal debate, a prognosis far too similar in character to their suggestion that the current American regime is doing exactly this in its approach to the rest of the

world. Only Kohn suggests an alternative paradigm, namely that North America is in practice a range of cultures, values, and political and social projects that can often and easily transcend national borders. While applied to the early twentieth century, instead of the early twenty-first, Kohn's arguments demand that Canadian academics consider tempering the tendency to oversimplify what is in fact a much more complex, and indeed much more interesting, social and political transnational reality.

Too Close for Comfort by Maude Barlow takes up the current call of the Canadian left, a good portion of the Canadian centre, and even former Prime Minister Paul Martin, namely that the current American administration of George W. Bush is on a dangerous, unilateral course to alter the nature of American governance and the international order. Rather than examine the effect this trend is having worldwide, Barlow effectively concentrates on how Canada is faring in "Fortress North America"; naturally enough, the news is not good. Using current policy and economic data, Barlow identifies some of the core decisions of the current era, based on the premise that "deep integration", defined as the "effective erasure of the border between Canada and the United States", will "affect everything" (p. x). The author proposes that in fact the "four major questions of our time" include deepening Third World poverty, the need to end fundamentalist extremism, how to recognize the globe's ecological limits and develop appropriate strategies, and the stated intent of the Bush administration to weaponize space (p. 255).

Barlow's starting point, in line with the major criticisms established by many of George W. Bush's detractors, is the stunning bi-polar assessment of the current global environment between terrorists on one hand and "friends of the United States" on the other (p. 34). Barlow translates this inflexible view into some stark numbers: the United States is currently running a $1.4 trillion deficit (p. 35); the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System has created a list of 80,000 names (p. 98); the top ten contractors of the American Pentagon received more than $80 billion in 2003 alone. The study's attention quickly shifts, however, to the effect these policy choices have had on Canada: a *laissez-faire* attitude towards dwindling American water supplies due to the availability of the "wet, green sponge to the North" (p. 214). As with much of Barlow's past work, her use of figures and their application to trends is impressive. Moreover, the author takes very seriously the wording and (available) details of reports offered by groups like the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, rather than chalking it up to corporate bluster (pp. 84–85, 124).

As a result, Barlow's work provides the reader with a very contemporary and relevant primer on topics as varied as the extent of religious rhetoric among a leading cohort of American politicians, the debate over ballistic missile defence, the powers of the International Civil Liberties Monitoring Group, food safety standards, the available profits for American companies in the Tar Sands, and the sale of Canadian water to the United States. Moreover, the author explores the consequences of these policies for the Canadian

environment, providing data on the harmonization of Bill C–36 and the American Defence Department (pp. 110–116), the higher death rates in for-profit hospitals over not-for-profit hospitals (p. 121), and changes to Environment Canada standards and policies that fall in line with Smart Regulation (pp. 178–185). *Too Close for Comfort* ends with a "who's who" of the American Conservative infrastructure, offering a brief CV of each personality's contribution to the Neo-Conservative movement since the late 1970s (and the late 1960s in the case of Donald Rumsfeld).

Barlow posits a host of strategies and methods through which Canada can help push for positive global adjustments to our most pressing concerns. The author has accurately picked up on the slow but steady move of Western democracies towards the right, which has become far more efficient and cohesive than the left in recent years. Barlow also correctly identifies the danger that trend poses to some of the important — some would say fundamental — Canadian political projects of the post-war era. However, Barlow instead seems to be perpetuating the assumed overlap between a dislike of George Bush and his large entourage (and perhaps large segments of the American business community itself) and "Americans" as a group. For instance, Barlow's review of the rise of the Neo-Con project, which began in the 1960s and eventually begat George Bush, sets aside the critical "Liberal" achievements of the era: civil rights legislation for African Americans, major advances in the treatment of women, federal attacks on religious bigotry, recognition of the rights of ethnic minorities, homosexuals, and Americans with special needs, and the reversal of landmark Supreme Court cases concerning civil rights were all achieved in an era that is painted mostly in terms of the slow rise of Neo-Con politics (pp. 36–40). Inevitably, then, the battle against the current Bush administration by those Americans who continue to cherish those achievements is minimized.

The major problematic features of Barlow's assertions can be summed up in her own indictment of the Christian Right, which the author asserts "introduce[s] into the political realm a degree of inflexibility, passion, and rancour" (p. 24). Is Barlow's work, which states that "the hawks in the White House are intent upon imposing their revolution on the world and creating an enemy out of anyone who dares to dissent" (p. 60), any less passionate? Is it any less rancourous to characterize George W. Bush's campaign strategy to become governor of Texas as "drinking and partying hard" (p. 227) or to assert that "Bush positions himself as a prophet, directly in touch with God" (p. 48)?

Barlow's suggestion that "Canada must retain the ability to form its own foreign and military policy based on assessment of its best interests and in a way that reflects its long-held values" would probably find widespread support among the Canadian public (p. 88). Moreover, the danger that the US government (and some forces in Canada) are attempting to remove this option is convincingly highlighted by Barlow's work and supported by her evidence. But the force of these recommendations is blunted by the foray into unnecessary oversimplification that introduces an element of inflexibility

and intolerance and places her argument dangerously close in spirit to the same forces the author is fighting to overturn. As such, the otherwise informed, logical, and reasonable suggestions offered in *Too Close For Comfort* open themselves to fail by the very criteria with which they condemn the current political projects of the American right and the Bush administration.

Virtual Sovereignty: Nationalism, Culture and the Canadian Question presents a different take on Canadian-American relations, focusing on a range of "Canadian culture, ideology, history and identity" (p. 9) throughout the past century rather than since the late 1970s and 1980s. In this work, author Robert Wright presents a series of thematic essays that engage "the Canadian question": how much like the United States is Canada and what can we or should we do about it? Wright proceeds through a series of incisive and refreshingly critical chapters on the development of Canadian culture through the contributions of the Group of Seven and the Canadian Radio and Telecommunications Corporation's standards for Canadian content. This is followed by a timely review of the state of Canadian history (including the newer dynamic of history television), the state of nationalism among Canadian youth, and finally a look back at the particular dynamics awakened by the tumultuous events of September 11.

To a great extent, Wright asks much more effective questions than does Barlow, if sometimes prompting, through the book's inclusions, answers that bear a similar resemblance to *Too Close For Comfort*. Wright begins, for example, with George Rawlyk's observations and feelings towards "the nature of the relationship between Canada and the United States, in all its historic dynamism" (p. 13). However, he also quotes a later piece in which Rawlyk "laments", as did George Grant, that in the old days it was easy to understand the calls to "preserve the Canadian nation" as did the British Loyalists and the armies in the War of 1812. As a result Rawlyk, and to some extent the specific topics covered in *Virtual Sovereignty,* lament a past that never really resonated among all groups of Canadians and should surely, in the twenty-first century, be left in the past.

Wright also identifies some of the same difficult challenges as Barlow. For example, Wright forecasts the Canada that will be because of the rupture between current Canadian priorities and those of past decades. "[G]enerous state support for public education, cultural production, and the social safety net … [and] a Canada that cared deeply about young people and understood them to be central to the project of nation-building" (p. 17) are not only the most obvious breaks from the Canada of the 1960s and 1970s, but constitute priorities that will likely continue to deteriorate as Boomers shift the economic needs of Canadian society from the young and younger to the older and aging. Again, Wright, like Barlow, places much of the blame on the amorphous American state and its penetration of contemporary Canada, a major difference from the mentality of the 1960s and 1970s when, in the words of Jody Berland, "[Canadians] wanted to be the beaver, not the eagle; the Mountie, not the Green Beret" (p. 18).

Wright's third section does indeed identify an increasingly shocking casualty of the social policies of the twenty-first century: the exclusion of youth in the national project. Wright focuses on the misleading labels currently attributed to the country's youngest generations, the "zero tolerance" approach to youth activities and crime, and the sky-rocketing tuition loan debt. However, one could easily add the sudden dismantling of mandatory retirement, the attempt to impose legal punishment on those who break curfew, and the economic (rather than the pedagogical) focus of the child care debate to illustrate that youth in Canada are certainly becoming less prominent in national planning. Young people and college students everywhere should applaud Wright for pointing out that youth in Canada "have been singularly disadvantaged by the retreat of the welfare state" (p. 20).

These important contributions notwithstanding, there remain a number of choices made by Wright in his research that strike the reader as bizarre. For example, Wright's warning about the shallowness of nationalisms in English Canada has merit at its base; anyone who believes that commitment to a national project can be built on the backs of hockey and beer ads alone will sooner or later be in for a rude awakening. However, Wright seems to push that argument in the wrong direction. Canadians' willingness to "embrace diversity, to imagine their own identities as subjective, fluid and socially constructed" is not in itself something to be worried about, unless one believes that nationalism can only be concentrated around flags, anthems, and soldiers (p. 153). Indeed, Canadians' comfort with diversity need not be mutually exclusive with older ties to the Canadian project. Moreover, the survival of nationalism in Quebec, in Newfoundland and Labrador, and among various Aboriginal groups in this country pushes back against charges of a "decline" in Canadian nationalisms. Change and continuity are not always opposites, and, as many historians write, they often work in concert.

It is also somewhat disconcerting to see a study that purports to discuss "the Canadian Question" not only electing not to engage "French Canada", but failing to offer an explanation as to why this decision was taken. While there are still a range of plausible reasons as to why one might limit a study of "Canada" to only its English-speaking component, this limitation must be acknowledged and thoroughly explained. The omission also seems curious given Wright's topic; surely the expansion of the same premises applied to both linguistic cultures would greatly inform his questions concerning the motivations and patterns of culture in Canada.

In many respects, Wright's engagement of the American fact is more of the "elephant in the room" variety; the desire for cultural distinctiveness outlined in chapter 1, the Canadian content discussed in chapters 2 and 3, the missing "other" around which previous generations rallied noted in chapter 6, for example, are all indirect references to the United States. Moreover, the work is defined in the preface as the author's "modest contribution" to the "obsession" of Canadian sovereignty" (p. 9), complete with the bookends of Goldwin Smith and September 11. In addition, the author's conclusion

emphasizes the "pro-American" nature of Canadian politics since September 11 — Jean Chrétien's acceptance of NAFTA, the appointment of "the most pro-American" (p. 264) of Chrétien's ministers to influential cabinet positions, Paul Martin's and Stephen Harper's "pro-American" campaigns — as examples of the possible death knell of Canadian sovereignty. Only the recent and sudden increase in the willingness of Canadians to stand up to the United States suggests that these rumours proved to be "greatly exaggerated" (p. 272).

One cannot help but return to what seems to be Wright's lasting premise: that Canadian nationalism — the "Canadian question" — is always informed by a monolithic idea of what the United States is, that when positioning one's art, one's television, or one's social policy in opposition to the "American" counterpart, all Canadian parties concerned agree on the exact same (and single) notion of "American". At times, and as part of Wright's admission to personal ambivalence on the subject (pp. 16–17), it seems as though the author is on the verge of discovering the true complexities of Canadian-American relations. In chapter 4, which includes much-needed discourse on the increasing lack of attention to history in Canadian society, Wright notes that Granatstein's well-known 1998 lament missed the point, namely that " 'who we are' and how 'we' understand ourselves as social and political actors is determined ... by far more pervasive (and powerful) discourses about the way the world is organized" (p. 101). If this is true, should it not logically follow that Canadians' and Americans' understandings of how their world is organized are also open to wider interpretation? Indeed, given the recent drama of hotly contested American elections, given the popularity of the biting criticism of television host John Stewart and filmmaker Michael Moore, one could argue that Canadians are now more aware than ever that American society, just like Canadian society, is home to several distinct and competing points of view.

Of the three works reviewed for this essay, only the third, Edward P. Kohn's *This Kindred People: Canadian-American Relations and the Anglo-Saxon Idea, 1895–1903*, puts forward the notion that the relationships of peoples in Canada and the United States are varied and dependent on other criteria than geography and its associated nationalism. Instead, as evidenced through even the limited experience of Anglo-Saxon Canadians and Americans at the turn of the twentieth century, a myriad of other identity markers, such as ethnicity, language, class, and religion, dissect the various national projects into far smaller and more flexible units. Kohn's description of the constant need for English Canadians to "reconcile ... national, imperial, continental, and cultural outlooks" (p. 95) offers an analytic approach that is much more likely to be attuned to the nuanced and varied components of the Canadian-American relationship than are the starting positions of either Barlow or Wright.

This Kindred People begins by specifically noting that "historians have had difficulty looking beyond traditional American Anglophobia and Cana-

dian anti-Americanism, treating these trends of thought as unquestionable constants of their respective national histories" (p. 11). By examining the racist ideology of "Anglo-Saxonism" in North America during its peak in the English-speaking world (p. 10), Kohn reveals political and social identity to be much more complex than geographic boundaries. As the world began to change at the end of the nineteenth century, "America's rise to world power status and the Anglo-American rapprochement ... forced Americans and Canadians to adapt to the new international reality" (p. 4). Kohn suggests that the rubric of "Anglo-Saxonism" allowed English-speaking Euro-Canadians and English-speaking Euro-Americans to find more in common with each other than they had with any group of immigrants or religious and cultural outsiders. Thus Anglo-Saxonism "provided a rationale that could compete, and often coincide, with traditional elements of national identity" in both countries (p. 12).

Kohn's work proceeds through a series of examples huddled around the turn of the century in which both Canadians and Americans sought to use Anglo-Saxonism as a strategy to moderate previous hostilities and disagreements between them. Caught in the need to become allies due to mass immigration and competing empires, Kohn suggests, in this particular social and political context, they found that working together for common goals superseded the older prejudices of Canadian loyalism and American anglophobia (p. 8). While Americans in this era would be content to view a continent "unified ideologically, if not politically" (p. 9), many Canadians would create the first example of the North Atlantic Triangle or lynchpin theory to play up the unique position of Canada as an intermediary between the Anglo-Saxon entities of Great Britain and the United States. Indeed, the particular events of those years — the Anglo-American Joint High Commission, the Spanish-American War, the American annexation of the Philippines, and the South Africa War — present a fascinating cross-section of racial rhetoric *cum* state policy. Each of these occurrences, along with the emergence of the trend itself — first apparent in the softening of rhetoric between the United States and Great Britain in the Venezuelan border crisis of 1895 — receives its own chapter in Kohn's book. The good times would end, suggests Kohn, with the Alaska Boundary Dispute, the author's final case study.

Kohn explores how racial identity, class identity (of the middle and upper varieties), fear of the "other", and understandings (or more appropriately misunderstandings) of scientific thought not only added layers of complexity to Euro-North American self-concepts, but supplanted the barriers of political borders. Indeed, according to Kohn's work, nationalism in the English-speaking world at the turn of the century had been replaced by the identities of "ethnicity and language". While ignoring neither the reality of the border (such as the differing targets of Anglo-Saxonism in both countries) nor the social and political projects that stood to gain by the reduction of the border's presence (for example, combining forces to impede the progress of rival ethnic empires like Japan and Russia), Kohn offers a study of the complexity of

Canadian-American relations as it intersects with other trends and cultural and political projects.

Indeed, Kohn's case studies constitute appropriate choices and illustrations of his broader theme. For example, chapter 3 explores the themes surrounding the Spanish-American War; imperialism, Anglo-Saxon dogma (especially Britain's call for a new "Anglo-Saxon alliance" with the United States during the conflict), and, most importantly for Kohn, the "White Man's Burden" (pp. 92–93). Pressured to a great extent by Britain's new enthusiasm for American expansion overseas, Kohn writes, English Canadians buried the recent decade of anti-Americanism under a pile of Anglo-Saxon rhetoric. Buying into popular racialized depictions of the Spanish aggressors propagated in the American press, English Canadians followed that logic to the wider global scale and sought both continental security and opportunities for global trade by lining themselves up with the new Anglo-Saxon partners against the growing threats of other cultural empires.

Chapter 4, while examining various aspects of the peak of Anglo-Saxonism, adds the rhetoric of Anglo-Saxon duty and glory to the bevy of previously established motives for English-Canadian enthusiasm during the South African War. Indeed, Kohn puts forth a compelling case for the similarities between rhetoric in the United States prior to the Spanish-American War (for example, the savageness of the Spaniards and the need to support the benevolent efforts of the Americans) and rhetoric in Canada and the United States prior to the South African War (for example, the savageness of the Boers and the need to support the benevolent efforts of the British) (pp. 136–137, 143–147). Chapter 5 revives research on the Alaska Boundary Dispute by putting forth its own dispute with traditional Canadian historiography, which, Kohn claims, seems to have ignored, as did the Canadian delegation, that the United States was already "far and away the ascendant power in the hemisphere", making the resulting boundary dispute tribunal "always a diplomatic construct and not a board of arbitration" (pp. 170–171). Moreover, Kohn notes that, in a very lasting way, the Alaska Boundary Dispute finally helped the United States differentiate Canadian motives from British ones (p. 195).

Kohn's conclusions should not be taken too far, and he is conscious of their limitations. English Canadians, in the course of seven years, did not abandon the anti-American rhetoric of the earlier 1890s and quickly returned to it in the pre-war period. Kohn's recurring caveat that Anglo-Saxonism was merely a rapprochement between Canada and the United States, and not a permanent shift in attitude and opinion, sometimes leaves the reader with the impression that this short-lived trend carried very little and very fragile currency, even in the last years of the nineteenth century. Indeed, in some respects Kohn does little that seriously dislodges the older contention that Canadian nationalism is a zero-sum game between allegiance to Great Britain and comfort with the United States. Moreover, Kohn misses a brilliant opportunity to delve into the splendid array of editorial cartoons collected for this work. Rather than leaving them as self-evident, Kohn could have taken

advantage of recent work on visual images and provided a much more detailed analysis of their content to support his argument.

Both Wright's book and Barlow's work are insightful updated versions of familiar topics in Canadian scholarship. Given that policies, political trends, and worldwide insights are always in flux and that new sources of material are always revealing themselves, Barlow's latest instalment of the Council for Canadians mandate and Wright's foray into the area of Canadian culture and cultural policy both represent projects that must refresh themselves often if they are to remain relevant to readers. For example, Wright's critique of Canada's recent embracing of "pop demography", which "reduces all social conflict — if not social experience — to competition between generational cohorts" (p. 120), astutely observes the benefits this has above all for the marketing of consumer products in all its contemporary forms; Barlow, in her work, suggests a conclusion of the same ilk when pointing out plans to introduce a new Canadian *Health Protection Act* that would "give a boost to Canadian industry by lowering safety standards" (p. 165). Moreover, Wright's demands for action to resolve plummeting educational standards in Canada and a decline in the interest in history — due in part to neo-conservative "recastings" of what about history is important to know — dovetails nicely with Barlow's warnings concerning recent conservative (and Conservative) trends in Canada. Both observations are not merely wake-up calls (they have been evident for quite some time), but demand explanations as to why many Canadians have not yet seriously questioned the benefits of this progression.

However, both works limit their ability to generate effective debate and pragmatic solutions because of their tendency to reduce the American component of the equation to a single (albeit loud) voice. Therefore, both works could benefit from the conceptual framework of Kohn's "transnational" (p. 204) study. Doing so, one could argue, might not only contribute to a more flexible and incisive evaluation of the discourse on Canadian-American relations, but may reveal a varied set of allies in Canada, the United States, and elsewhere, who could contribute to the ongoing projects of Canadian and North American society.

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