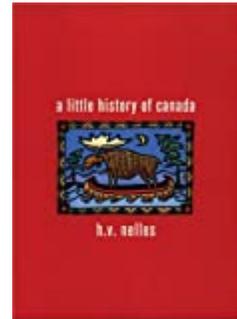


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



H. V. Nelles. *A Little History of Canada*. Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2004. xi + 268 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-541837-8.



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“This slim volume ...”

At my first scholarly conference many years ago, I recall that one afternoon’s worth of papers was followed by a brief roundtable discussion. An older colleague stood up and posed a question to the panel of experts: “Where do you think the next grand narrative is coming from?” I thought at the time that it was quite a good question and readied myself for some quite good answers, only to notice a hush fall over the room. The experts, and much of the audience, were regarding the questioner with looks that ranged from disbelief to contempt. “Narrative history,” went the implied rebuke, “is the refuge of the amateur dabbler and the old-fashioned popularizer—it is not practiced by the real historian.” As a lowly doctoral candidate, I found myself joining in the quiet chorus of “tut-tuts,” much to my later regret—because I still think it was quite a good question.

While the book’s very title would seem to suggest that it’s not a grand narrative, H. V. Nelles’s *A Little History of Canada* comes close to what my older colleague was looking for. Rather than attempting a detailed survey history in the mold of Ken McNaught’s *The Penguin History of Canada* (first published in 1969 and reprinted many times), Nelles has written what might be called a primer. It is an outline of the main themes of Canadian history, intended to provide Canadians, new or old,

with a sketch of their country’s past, and to give background to the traveller who is visiting the country and has eight hours on an airplane to acquire a basic command of the historical context (indeed, the book’s small trim size makes it ideal for this purpose, for it fits easily into purse or jacket pocket).

As an overarching theme, Nelles has chosen the notion of adaptation and transformation, using the native Transformation Mask as a nice symbol: Canada is a country that is constantly in flux, changing its society, its economy, its politics, even its environment as the decades passed. One might say that any national history could be written using the same theme, but what makes it work so well here is the periodization that Nelles has adopted. Instead of the great events that usually mark the change in chapters of textbooks and popular histories (the Conquest of 1759-60, the rebellions of 1837-38, Confederation, the beginning of the First World War in 1914), Nelles ends each chapter with the country having entered, if only temporarily, a period of relative equanimity. So, his first chapter ends in the 1740s, when the French regime was at its height and stability and prosperity reigned over the European possessions in northern North America. His second chapter takes the story up to the 1840s, after the Act of Union brought a similar sense of temporary calm to affairs in British North America, while the third

concludes with the Royal Visit of 1939, when looming war in Europe was overshadowed by the glow of imperial pride and almost palpable relief that the Depression was rapidly becoming a memory.

It is a tall order to write such an account, even a primer, in 250-odd pages, but Nelles handles it with aplomb. He keeps the number of names to a minimum (always important for a history filled with so many Mcs and Macs), and elevates conciseness to a fine art. At one point, he asks what can usefully be written in one paragraph about Pierre Trudeau's constitutional accomplishments, and then proceeds to clarify the subject better in a single page than many authors are able to do in an entire book (pp. 238-239). The rest of the chapters are of the same order: events are condensed and stripped down to their bare essentials, without sacrificing either chronology or thematic consistency. He even manages to sneak in a few points that might stir up some debate. He rightly observes that Canadian historians have been preoccupied of late with the differences, be they religious, ethnic, class, or gender, that characterize Canada's peoples, but posits that we have underestimated the degree to which institutions, associations, and collective activity have "knit Canadians together, sometimes unconsciously, into larger communities at the regional and national levels" (p. 158). To some scholars, this might sound uncomfortably like nation-building, with all its centrist and elite-manipulation connotations, but it is an argument worth considering nonetheless. There is even a refreshing gibe at contemporary events with his description of the American invasion of Canada in 1775 and the comment that "the dangerous delusion of the United States that the world is waiting to be liberated by them goes back a long way" (p. 76).

Of course, any book like this will send specialists flipping through the pages to count how many lines pertain

to their specific areas of interest. My own particular beefs are that the First World War gets a scant five pages while the Second World War gets seventeen, and that cultural history is largely conspicuous by its absence. Having said that, it's hard to argue that anything in the book could have been left out. Writing a single-volume history like this demands some tough choices, particularly if the publisher has no interest in putting out *A Great Big History of Canada*. And on balance, Nelles has chosen well.

Even though he claims to have written for the non-specialist reader, anyone who teaches or works in Canadian history can benefit from reading it, not only because of his interesting periodization and his impressive ability to make comprehensible things which have rarely seemed so, but for the terrific turns of phrase that any lecturer can ruthlessly pillage. Personally, I intend to plunder such classics as his reference to Canada at the Versailles conference competing for space with "some of the more operative European principalities" (p. 168), and his characterization of John Diefenbaker as "a raucous, gaudy, exotic bird in a parliamentary aviary of grey sparrows" (p. 213). And the description of Mackenzie King having "fastened himself terrier-like" to the Royal Couple during the visit of 1939" (p. 182) will always conjure up a mental picture to brighten even the dullest moment.

In the end, it must be said that this is a book you can judge by its cover, which features a delightful naive-style drawing of a moose standing in a canoe, with those great Canadian icons, pine trees bent against the wind, in the background. *A Little History of Canada* doesn't take itself too seriously, but still offers a sophisticated and informed account of Canada's evolution from the ancestral lands of the First Nations to a largely successful (if occasionally dysfunctional) modern nation-state. It's not a grand narrative, but it's a great place to start.

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