

(POP)CORN LAWS

BY THE TIME THIS EDITORIAL APPEARS, the question it addresses may well be resolved. Such is one of the dilemmas of quarterly publication: a given moment's burning issues may be cinders by the time a commentary gets into print. I write this in November 1986, shortly after the federal government enacted its Corn Law. It is one of several measures of economic retaliation directed against the United States, a reaction to an American embargo against Canadian lumber products, which is in turn part of a tit-for-tariff dance of defensive political posturing before one election and anticipating another. The Corn Law put up a tariff against the importation of American corn because the Americans put up a tariff against Canadian wood. The measure has at least the merit of giving some Canadian economic advantage to a Canadian industry (though there are other measures — like improving the rural irrigation systems in southern Ontario — that would also affect the character of the Canadian crop). (This is metaphor, not just agricultural history.) The previous Corn Law the government enacted imposed a tariff on American books as a protest against the American tariff on Canadian shingles. This one seems to me more of a puzzle, especially when the whole dance is taking place in the name of free trade.

I have problems with the book duty for several reasons: (1) it seems an inadequate solution to a problem in the shingle industry (a problem, incidentally, which turns out not to have affected sales in the way that was expected); (2) it treats books as a commodity purely, and as a luxury rather than as a resource; (3) it does a disservice to those book-reading citizens with limited incomes (of whom there are many) and to those Canadian industries (publishers, book-sellers) who depend significantly on these sales; (4) it does not directly benefit a Canadian industry; (5) it imposes a tariff on the free flow of information, implicitly permitting at least two unacceptable practices theoretically to result: allowing an anonymous bureaucracy to control what information may cross borders, and equating wealth with accessibility to information — i.e., access to books is denied to those with limited incomes, a previous problem in yet another guise, affecting libraries as well as individuals. (6) A sixth problem involves language: this tax applies only to books written in English, a decision which is

open to a variety of interpretations. Is anglophone culture deemed to be more vulnerable than francophone to American influence, or richer and more able to pay taxes, or is it a punitive gesture against anglophone readers, or is it merely discriminatory, in a peculiarly rudimentary and offensive sense?

I don't know what the intent is, except to teach Americans a lesson. Except that it seems such an ambiguous lesson, I'm not sure what will actually be learned. If the legislation presumes that the Canadian book industry will thrive because American books have become (more) expensive, that's at heart a curious idea: it suggests first of all that Canadians will choose to read cheap books rather than choose to read books because of what they're about, and it also suggests that Canadian books are essentially no different from American books — that there's no difference in kind or character, only a difference in printer and (perhaps) setting. That's simply not the way books work. Books aren't just commodities, bought to occupy the eyes on bus rides. Books also occupy the mind. And however indirectly, they derive from — and express — the values of the culture in which they are written. Simply put, American books have something to say, and merit reading; Canadian books also have something to say and merit reading — but they do not earn their readership by saying American things more cheaply; they earn it by saying what they have to say well. And they have value in Canada and elsewhere not only for their quality but also for the difference in perspective to which they give voice.

Obviously there does exist a kind of gelid-dessert school of literary economics that equates any one book with any other. But I don't buy it. Literary economics is a pressing matter for quite other reasons. There's a cultural need to protect Canadian publishers from external control, and there's a continuing need to invest money as well as energy in enterprises like the Canada Council and the CBC which encourage Canadian expression, in all its variety. It's a way of ensuring options of our own choice, and continuity. But that's not the same thing as controlling Canadian access to others. I cannot believe that anyone would be a better Canadian for *not* having heard Bach, read Faulkner, seen Italian film, or danced to reggae. Part of the vitality of Canadian culture derives in fact from its continuing awareness of the rest of the world. Therefore allow free trade *in ideas*, by all means. But don't negotiate cultural independence away. The two issues are not mutually exclusive.

Eric Nicol's latest book, *The U.S. or Us: What's the Difference, Eh?*, attempts to take a comic stance towards the Free Trade debate that recurrently (and currently) preoccupies Canadian money-mindedness. At one point Nicol rewrites the national anthem, sardonically redressing the political and economic "inadequacies" of the present version:

God help our land
When trade is free!

Eh Canada
 We stand on God for thee.
 Eh Canada
 What will be in it for me?

In effect, Nicol asserts that the appositeness of such lines shows that Canadian and American culture are so little different that an economic union between the two societies would make sense. Other commentators take up the same issue more solemnly. Articles in *Queen's Quarterly* in July 1986 argue that Canadian economic survival depends on the guaranteed market that a comprehensive free trade treaty with the United States would provide. But there are also opposing views. Stuart Smith, head of the Science Council of Canada, argues in *Australian-Canadian Studies* that the theoretical design of a free-trade pact is based on a faulty (natural resource) limitation of Canada's economic potential: in effect, economics has not yet figured out how to deal with technology, he says. Resource economies do not need to defer forever to the status quo, because technology is not fixed in place; it is a process, which provides us a means of engineering our own economic advantage: irrigation and intellect in a time of stress are a kinetic solution to a static relationship. James Laxer's *Leap of Faith* further argues that a free-trade "deal" is both short-sighted and inopportune: "We will be adopting the American model just when its weaknesses are becoming most evident," he writes. And John Hutcheson's editorial in the November 1986 *Canadian Forum* applies the free-trade debate to issues affecting the broadcasting industry, in particular to the role as "public trustee" with which such industries are empowered.

Mel Hurtig, Nicol's publisher, nationalist to the core, fashions one of the most ironic features of *The U.S. or Us* when on the book's jacket there appears this disclaimer: "The opinions expressed in this book are definitely those of the authors [the co-author/illustrator is Dave More] and in no way, at no time, and under no circumstances whatsoever even remotely reflect the views of the publisher." Given the circumstances, the note seems more than a marketing strategy. The conflict here involves a disparity between two groups of people: those who ask how we do business, and those who ask how we live; those who see investment and culture as separate notions, with the amount of financial profit taking absolute precedence over all else, and those who see investment in culture as a necessary option, qualifying the desirability of "maximum" profit by the desirability of the shared values of a way of life. That "international" perspective I mentioned earlier is among these values.

Which brings me back to the Corn Laws and the prospect of free trade as it is currently being discussed. The problem is that what's being *called* "Free Trade" is not in fact what is being envisioned. What's being talked about is a trading *bloc*, an economic union between Canada and the United States, a restricted

Free Trade *Zone*, “Fortress North America,” open to internal market competition but collectively, uniformly, closed to other borders. Hence the real arguments are not so much economic (about tariffs) as they are sociopolitical (about government investment and involvement in support for health care, the arts, the reduction of regional economic disparities: in short, in quality of life). Inevitably, they’re about the character of the respective relations between Canada and the U.S. and the rest of the world. As long as the social structures, institutions, and services Canadians value are deemed to be “foreign” to the American economic model, it is more likely that Canada would be invited to bend to American postures rather than that America would bend to Canada’s. Would Canada, in the kind of Free Trade Future currently being imagined, have to give up its special connections with the Commonwealth, Latin America, The People’s Republic of China? The answer, so far as I can see, is “yes.” And does this matter? *Most adamantly, yes*, for it’s a cultural as well as a simple monetary decision. Now, a mainline economic free-trader would say “no,” arguing that the U.S. is Canada’s greatest market, and therefore that pragmatic concerns dictate economic posture. This version of reality seems to me to accept present circumstances as though they were ideal and as though they were fixed. Yet there are markets elsewhere that could be cultivated; and there are ideas in more parts of the world than one. The American dollar is not, as nightly news reports implicitly suggest, the only consequential point of economic comparison. If the Reykjavik Summit did nothing else, it advertised to the world that Iceland is self-sufficient in products like citrus fruit, that it produces food under glass, with sunlight and thermal energy. Such self-sufficiency is a quality that might be preferable to economic (and invariably, social) dependency. For to negotiate away the viability of an independent Canadian set of connections with the rest of the world would be to give up more than trading rights. It would mean giving up the options that the vicissitudes of history have granted, and which too few Canadians yet consciously recognize are theirs to *apply* and *enjoy*.

A 1944 David Low cartoon (collected in *Years of Wrath*, a Gollancz “cartoon history” of the years 1932-45) shows Winston Churchill offering a single-size suit both to Canada’s short, round Mackenzie King and to South Africa’s long, narrow Smuts. The suit is called “Commonwealth Unity”; but the caption reads “H’m. . . show us your outsizes.” The two dominions, in mid-war, were resisting the invitation to wear one uniform, someone else’s at that. They proclaimed the need for their “association” to remain “free.” Much has happened to this association in forty years, and South Africa has retreated from it, into a mindset, a dogma, a structure of belief that barricades it from change. Such isolationism does not seem to me a model Canada can productively adopt, though it has its adherents. The Commonwealth, by contrast, though it seems to many people to be an historical dinosaur, remains surprisingly alive, valuable

because it has evolved outside the frame of current superpower territoriality and because it remains resistant to the old imperial uniform. It opens options, in other words. It is one of *several* relationships that opens options. The problem with the current invitation to “free trade” — though it seems *in name* to espouse openness — is that in reality it would isolate, and the isolation would be of someone else’s design.

“People like certainties,” writes Doris Lessing, in the 1985 CBC Massey lectures published as *Prisons We Choose to Live Inside*. “More, they crave certainty, they seek certainty, and great resounding truths. They like to be part of some movement equipped with these truths and certainties, and if there are rebels and heretics, that is even more satisfying” — for to the faithful, the presence of rebels simply confirms the wisdom of their own belief. Lessing’s talks begin by referring to South Africa, but they end up concerned less with that country in particular than with the more widespread pressures of group-thought. Group-thought is easy, attractive, apparently secure, dogmatic, therefore dangerous (because isolating, and because it stems more from the fear of insecurity than from the thoughtful consideration of consequences). Moreover, Lessing adds, history repeatedly shows us that one day’s dogma is another day’s absurdity — which nonetheless does not stop dogma from appealing in some form to successive generations.

The relevance of these observations to Canada today should be clear. The invitation to wear one economic face — inherently a political decision, not merely a monetary one — is just such an appeal, more tempting perhaps because it seems to come from within Canada. And more tempting because it verbally at least offers the illusion of adventurous security. But is “Fortress North America” the model Canadians should choose to live by? Should we barricade ourselves behind other people’s priorities? I think there are separate structures to value, and many different lines of connection to preserve. The invitation to wear one (uniform) suit before the rest of the world therefore continues to need resisting — not so much for corn’s sake as for culture’s.

Will Canada therefore act wisely? More to the point, will Canadians make their *own* choice of priorities rather than permit others to make such decisions for them? I don’t know. But consider the form of this editorial: it’s cast in the future. Perhaps it’s Utopian.

W.N.

POSTSCRIPT: Perhaps it is; perhaps it isn’t. On budget day, 19 February 1987, the tariff on books and computer parts was dropped, which importantly recognizes the invidiousness of the initial legislation. A tariff on Christmas trees was also dropped, the reasons unspecified. Unrelatedly (I think), a new tax was imposed on popcorn. But more important than the present set of new levies is

yet another one hinted for the near future — a Value Added Tax system, which would impose a tax on each business exchange in Canada, which cannot have any other result than to send prices spiraling. By such a system, wood would be taxed when it became paper, paper taxed when it became printer's stock, printer's stock taxed when it became a journal: possibly journals would also be taxed when the copies were put up for sale. The consumer will be asked yet again to absorb the costs; but this time the costs will be hidden in a product's manufacturing history and only announced at the end. The new invidiousness of a multiple set of covert percentage increases is obvious. So is the inflationary character of this taxation method. One would like to believe that the idea will be abandoned before it comes to pass, and perhaps it will. There's still time to object.

W.N.

ORCHARD MORNING

Kay Smith

In the first orchard morning
 you wake to the divine visitor
 in your bed.
 Light opens like a lily.
 Tangled in the sheet his body honours,
 you marvel at the oceanic calm
 upon him as he lies sleeping after love.
 You see him as deliverer
 as the sun kissing your cold breasts.

I too had a lover
 now yours,
 one who will not rise to me from the depth of our embrace,
 my legacy from him a three-fold vision;
 as god I saw him
 as lion lying down with lamb and
 (most poignantly and mercifully)
 ordinary-extraordinary
 man

who,
 when from topmost tree
 to earth I fell,
 fed you my heart to keep you both well.