



## ALPHABET SOUP

SOME THINGS this country makes of itself:

- A for Bryan Adams, who took alouettes under his wing, so to speak, and gave Canadian music a beat and a conscience;
- B for the endemic Bank ads, which star everybody (Bonhommes Carnaval and Sept-heures may be booked for next season, or negotiating a contract);
- C for Coyote the trickster, in all his forms; and other icons of measurement: cups, both Stanley and Grey; the Chautauqua and Charlebois; Calendar art; Louis Cyr, the strongest man alive; and “Snap Crackle Pop” (a line making Leo Kennedy possibly the most widely quoted Canadian poet ever, including the creator of Sam McGee);
- D for Direct Mail Advertising (I’m partial to one magazine that reached me recently, promising “Werewolves, Death Stars, Lobster Biologists, A. J. Casson, Inuit shamans, Farley Mowat . . . and You” — most just print my name in computer type and suggest I *may* already be a millionaire);
- E for the West Edmonton Mall: the more said about it, the bigger it gets (like Pinocchio’s nose? They grow tales as tall in Olds and Grande Prairie as in Harbour Grace and Dildo — anyway, what ever happened to Eaton’s catalogue?);
- F for Frum, the Forum, the Farm Broadcast, *My Fur Lady*, and *Fraggle Rock*: the voices of airwave and screen — Les Plouffe, Fundy’s fiddles — and the facsimile voices of Rich Little;
- G for Green Gables and the Great White North, gauges of cultural change, perhaps;
- H for Hailey, Hollywood South, and all those actors-in-exile (Alexis, Raymond, Leslie, Mary P.), who fill cocktail chatter with claims to Canadian notoriety; also for *Hockey Night in Canada* (notoriety at home); and for

- “Any Hallowe’en Handouts,” that decorous phrase of my childhood, before “Trick or Treat” came along with its militant dualism;
- I for Imports, of course: the finite number allowed each football team, and the indeterminate number the Incomparable Atuk stopped at the Border by merchandising Canadian junk instead;
- J for *Jacob Two-Two*, Don Messer’s *Jubilee*, and all those other testaments to endurance and longevity; Jackrabbit Johannsen, Jack-Armstrong-the-All-American-Boy, who turned out (like Superman) to be Canadian-born;
- K for Klondike Days (live action from the past) and W.L.M.K. (same thing);
- L for Lacrosse (the national game that no-one plays), for Laura Secord (the national heroine that everyone thinks invented chocolate), Little Theatre (the national pastime that no-one’s willing to pay to see), and Letters to the Editor (the national pastime);
- Mc for McMarketing (*see*: Imports);
- M for Memorabilia (Mounties, maples, Massey-Fergusons, Old Montreal);
- N for “Necessary,” as in “Conscription if necessary, but not necessarily . . .,” and other phrases that fall from political lips *chez nous* with Niagara’s nicety (“Fuddle Duddle,” “Sacred Trust,” “The 20th Century belongs . . .,” “*Vive . . .*”);
- O for Oscar Peterson, motif and improvisations; out — and about;
- P for Pyrogies, Pierre, and Gilbert Parker, three of several halves to a peculiarly Canadian equation;
- Q for Harlequins, and the vicariousness of their passive quests for passion;
- R for the Rockies (perennial bestsellers); for Richard Rohmer, who makes bestsellerism sell; and for Royal Commissions, by which we perennially sell solutions;
- S for Screech, Scrod, Selye’s Stress; and *Seeing Things*, which managed to turn the Group of Seven into the villains of a murder-mystery, and named a smalltown Ontario librarian “Emily Carr”;
- T for Tea and Takeouts at the CN Tower, that centre of Cuisine Canada: a menu of fiddleheads and tandoori chicken, won ton and wild rice, arctic char and alligator pie (a little reminder that nursery rhymes are food for thought), and the flaky pastry of Madame Benoit;
- U for Usque, forgotten between the seas in *A mari usque ad mare* — a word

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- I've long suspected had an intertextual appeal to those usquebaugh-toting forefathers Sir John A. and his cronies;
- V for Victoria Day — and Victoria, for that matter: both testaments in their way to the power of history to shape leisure time, and to the power of leisure-brokers to reshape the image of history;
- W for Weather (Wendigo and friend: “mon pays, ce n'est pas un pays, c'est l'hiver”);
- X for Calixa Lavallée, who put the O in Canada;
- Y for Ypres, a solemn reminder midst all this irony that history involves shared memories, often recorded in the place names of desperate moments — Châteauguay, Batoche, Vimy, Dieppe — and that those who acquire a new nation acquire a cultural history along with it, even if sometimes it has to be learned before it can be shared: still, poppies blow in Flanders Fields;
- Z for Mazo de la Roche, who made Jalna; for Gzowski, who made This Country in the Morning lively to be awake in, and still keeps it on Side; and for the Zipper: proof positive of the teeth in Canadian inventiveness.

What's the point in such a list? Nothing much. Just to say that Entertainment strives sometimes to be no more than that, and nothing less. Which means quality comes in different forms, and deserves to be recognized in all of them. And that some entertainments come to be shared. When this happens, a vocabulary of images and allusions, metaphors and catch-phrases, builds into the common word-stock of a whole culture. Literature makes use of it; people hear it, even when not listening for it; tone matters, and is understood. As the thriller writer Anthony Hyde declaimed, in a recent *Saturday Night*:

If I write a novel set on the far side of the moon, it will still be a Canadian novel. I cannot write anything other than a Canadian novel. I was born and brought up in the shadow of the bloody Peace Tower, I've lived here all my life. I watch Barbara Frum every night — if that doesn't get stamped onto my fiction somehow, it's the country's fault, not mine.

There it is, eh? The very air of recognition. The little things that stir into an alphabet of understanding.

W.N.