

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

**RENEE HULAN, *Northern Experience and the Myths of Canadian Culture*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press. 2002, x + 245 p., Index, \$75 hardcover.**

Renée Hulan sets out to destroy the myth that Canadian culture, and Canada as a nation, may be identified by what Wiebe (1989) refers to as the "nordicity" of Canadians, namely the use of geographical location, climatological extremes, and the actions taken by people to survive these factors. This cultural mythology, promoted and preserved in various forms of literature including ethnographic reports, fictional writings, biographical materials, and poetry, paints Canadians as an honorable, rugged, capable people. This strength, self-reliance, and determination purportedly characterize Canadians and is seen as the natural cultural outcome of the need to fight for survival and success in an undeveloped territory that offered unlimited opportunities for those with the imagination and courage to pursue them.

Such pursuits, in the face of harsh environmental conditions that allowed only the best to succeed, are captured in those works based on the 'quest' scenario (whether for individual 'coming of age' rituals, stories of exploration and daring, or the search for success in an untamed frontier) and fall under the category of entertainment. However, Hulan also discusses romanticized writings that explore the existence of a common Canadian identity influenced by life in a northern region. Hulan critically reviews this identity myth who sees its development as an attempt to rewrite a history in fact based on the movement of individuals from a variety of backgrounds with no common culture or race onto lands expropriated from displaced aboriginal nations. This less than heroic beginning has been papered over to establish an apparent "Canadian" cultural base that in turn validated the existence of Canada as a nation.

In destroying the myth, and replacing it with a version of the truth based on Canada as an artificially established collection of individuals with important differences among them due to issues of "cultural, racial, gender, and national identities," Hulan takes the reader through a detailed philosophical discussion of the reality and ideology behind the concepts of "north," "culture," and "nation." She focuses on determining the relevance, if any, of the "north" (in itself an amorphous concept that people use to refer to a place, a region, a setting, the wilderness, or the frontier) in creating a Canadian psyche that enables this group of divided individuals to nonetheless function as "Canadians" in an ideologically and politically

defined nation. However, she finds that any such "northern influence" has been artificially generated and promoted and is thus a sham that attempts to gloss over existing distinctions without resolving the issues that prevent the formation of a truly Canadian unified cultural identity.

As such, the book is not for the uninitiated with little or no prior experience of the field of cultural studies or the links between nationhood and the role that collective identity may play in defining the legitimacy of a purported nation. Race, language, common heritage and a national consciousness or spirit have all been referred to as sources of culture, and thus nationhood, but as noted by Hulan, circumstances in Canada did not support the creation of a nation for any of these reasons. As such, the artificially buttressed ideology that being "northern" provided a common heritage sufficient to justify Canadian nationalism acted to legitimize the government imposed by European immigrants on the entire population, including those truly culturally tied to the land. The improvised sense of shared heritage, shared suffering and shared sacrifice all acted to create solidarity by replacing differences between people with new rituals and beliefs and a love for the nation of which the disparate individuals were now members, albeit that the beliefs and solidarity were based on an imagined and idealized vision of what being "northern" meant to people and society.

Overall, Hulan's book provides an interesting glimpse into the world of literary support for the concept of a Canadian nation. More importantly, it debunks the mythical aspects of the culture created to legitimize the claim to national status made by individuals of European descent (primarily men) who held the economic and political power to promote their idea of what a "Canadian" should be and thus define "Canadian culture." She argues that gender played a major role in establishing cultural attributes and utilizes a critical gendered perspective in her analysis. Hulan presents a strong argument that Canada and Canadian culture have only a limited connection to the concepts associated with "being" northern. Further, she establishes a convincing argument that any belief in a northern cultural perspective is irrelevant as it does not act as a unifying cultural force. Rather, modern Canada is made up of numerous groups with their own traditions of culture, race, gender, and identity with its strength lying in the acceptance of this diversity.

**Sandra Magnusson** *University of Alberta*