

Massey's Impact on Canadian Culture Today

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Abstract

The Canada Council for the Arts is important because it gives funding to those institutions and establishments it deems integral to Canadian culture, this is based on Massey's somewhat narrow definition of what Canadian culture is. This essay will explore how Massey's definition of Canadian culture in The Royal Commission for the National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences has negatively impacted Canadian culture today by arguing that the highbrow themes present in the definition of Canadian Culture do not allow for mainstream culture to flourish.

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Social stratification is the system of hierarchical ranking people based on a number of socioeconomic factors such as occupation, wealth, income, social status (social and political power). Individuals who came from a higher socioeconomic background were considered intellectual. Therefore, their interests were deemed "highbrow" literally meaning "a person who possesses or has pretensions to

superior learning or culture”. Highbrow culture grew from the notion that the elite have access to the most superior cultural artifacts civilization has to offer. This can be seen through literature, dance, art, and music where the essence of the human condition is being reflected. One must be educated in the origins of the work, and that can only be done via access- which is limited. On the other hand, the word “lowbrow” meaning of, relating to, or suitable for a person with little taste or intellectual interest”. The cultural practices exhibited by those who identify as lowbrow are often derived from popular or mass culture. Unlike those practiced by the elites, it is cheaper and easily accessible as it is commercialized for the masses. The word highbrow was first used in 1875 (Hendrickson). It was based on the science of phrenology (which was discredited by that time). Franz Joseph Gall developed the discipline in 1796, it focused mainly on the measurements of the human skull. The word originated from the phrenological premise that proposed that a person of a higher intelligence and worldliness would have a higher brow line than someone possessing less intelligence and worldliness. Traditionally, those who were able to not only produce, but also enjoy and understand highbrow culture first had to possess the necessary tools to access this culture.

The Royal Commission for the National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences also known as the Massey Commission was established in 1949 by Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent. It consisted of five members, the chair was Vincent Massey, and the four other members were Georges-H enri L evesque who was the Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences at Laval University; Norman A. M. MacKenzie who was the president of the University of British Columbia and member of the Wartime Information Board; Hilda Neatby who was a professor of history from the University of Saskatchewan; and Arthur Surveyer, who was a civil engineer from Montreal. In 1951 the commission published a report after touring the country for two years and receiving 462 briefs (Druick). The origins of the commission can be traced to a number of reasons including “post-war Canadian nationalism (especially among the country’s cultural elite) and the related idea that the development of a distinct Canadian culture would be essential to the growth of Canada’s international reputation” (Mccaughey et al). The findings of the report are important as this “was the first time that a public document was issued

inviting the Canadian public and its legislators not only to theorize about the culture, but to involve theory in practice” (Davies 6) as Mccaughey et al point out “the Massey Commission has been likened to a public opinion survey as its consultative approach sought to gauge the value placed on Canadian culture by Canadians – or at least those Canadians consulted in the Commission’s proceedings” (110) this was done as the the Commission “held 224 consultative meetings across the country, accepted briefs from interested parties, hosted four advisory committees and commissioned a number of well-known Canadians to prepare critical studies on their areas of expertise” (110). The commission, therefor, at surface level seemed to be successful.

“Most definitions of the establishment rest on two interlocking sets of characteristics: one social and one ideological. Socially, the establishment was characterized by the privilege and self-conscious elitism of its members.... The ideological affinity...was in many ways a reflection of these social characteristics. Establishment figures were almost always successful...who had inherited, or acquired, a sense of entitlement mixed with civic responsibility that in another time or place might be called noblesse oblige ...people schooled in the ethic of public service that permeated the elite educational institutions and the social and familiar circles...it was therefore the duty of such people to serve the nation when called” (Brinkley 165). This quote may highlight Massey’s reasoning for defining culture the way he did- this is a sweeping view of noble desires for other-orientation infused with deliberate self-awareness, and heavily present self-oriented ascendancy over collective opinion and more often over their dignity. Finlay says “Massey's attitudes were deeply ambivalent, as well as being riddled with biases of gender and race. His view of culture illuminates much about Canada's cultural understatedness, about its propensity to ignore, even deny, its culture, and about the morass of often-conflicting assumptions that continue to conspire against culture's recognition. In the final analysis, Massey's contribution eludes strict categorization; his views were complex, nuanced, and invariably the product of consummate compromise (3). Massey’s views can be further dissected by Finlay who refers to an address Massey gave on the 8th of November 1929 where he said “while in maturer years the companionship of young women is desirable and necessary,” it was noted in one report on education that he sponsored, “yet in boys

of the adolescent age association with girls is liable to produce effeminacy” (46). This can be seen as Massey thinking that the system being discussed hampers the development of those distinguishing traits that make boys “manly”. This shows that for Massey, preserving those masculine virtues was of great importance as they contributed to Canadian society. As show by Finlay ““effeminacy had various negative associations ... with anything southern (often American), with European influences (understood as outmoded), and with technology” (83). In Massey’s eyes, the endurance of the strong and robust northern personality was crucial in order for the country to resist American homogenization. This can be linked to the “Garrison Mentality” theory prevalent in Canadian Literature. The ever prevalent question of what constitutes as Canadian culture is the basis for this- this mentality encouraged the idea of Canadian literature revolving around the romanticized theme of surviving the hostile Canadian environment that we (settler Canadians) build walls against it, and hide behind them which produces garrisons of the mind. This promoted the strict conservatism echoed by Massey, thus upholding the status quo.

Some of the reasons for bleak Canadian culture the report pointed out include the vast geography of Canada, the subsequent scattered population due to the vast geography, the relatively short history of the nation, and “an easy dependence on a huge and generous neighbor” (Massey). These reasons all led toward the requirement of a state patronage of the arts to be managed by an unrelated bureau. The Massey Commission's final report was in 1951, it stated that the arts and culture institutions in Canada were troubled with “lack of nourishment” and it recommended fortifying “those permanent instruments which give meaning to our unity and make us conscious of the best in our national life” (Massey). The two main results of the commission were the establishment of the National Library in 1953, and in 1957, the Canada Council for the Arts which is an independent Crown corporation that supplies grants and services to salaried Canadian artists and arts organizations, grants prizes and fellowships, and oversees the Art Bank. Section 15 of the report elaborates on why the Canada Council for the Arts is needed “no novelist, poet, short story writer, historian, biographer, or other writer of non-technical books can make even a modestly comfortable living by selling his work in Canada. No composer of music can live at all on what

Canada pays him[/her] for his compositions. Apart from radio drama, no playwright, and only a few actors and producers, can live by working in the theatre in Canada. Few painters and sculptors, outside the fields of commercial art and teaching, can live by sale of their work in Canada” (Massey). This shows that Massey understood that if Canadian artists are undervalued and are unable to sustain themselves then there would be a lack of cultural production, hence the need for an independent agent of the state to intervene and promote cultural production via funding. However, due to the narrow definition of Canadian culture presented in the Massey report arts and culture faces numerous challenges as grants, services, prizes and fellowships are only provided to those that fall within the definition even though the Canadian population is becoming progressively diverse. An example of this can be seen in analysis of the history of discomfort with popular culture by Beaty. Using the specific example of the case of pulp fiction and comic books in Canada they successfully demonstrate how the commission set up the the demise of this popular form of mass culture. “Parliament and the Massey Commission believed it was the role of memory institutions to mediate good taste. Today the impact of the Massey Commission is still felt. The belief in the licentious, tainted contagion of pulp fiction effectively led to its destruction not only by individual citizens, but also by Canadian memory institutions, which refused to collect it and thereby legitimize these works” (Beaty 201). This marginalization of popular culture in memory institutions can be attributed to the transient and disposable connotations it is society connects it to, it is seen as tasteless, and fleeting- a very easily disposable commodity.

In conclusion, I believe that while The Royal Commission for the National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences was intended to promote and cultivate a distinct Canadian culture, it’s narrow definition of culture has deterred the diverse field of culture from flourishing. I think what is now needed is a core conceptual structure that can construct better cultural policies that are not only relevant to the diverse environment of Canada today, but to future Canadians as well.

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