

Pierre Sarrazin's The Canadians

Andrew Malcolm's book, The Canadians, charmed readers by wrapping all those truisms that send a frisson of comfortable recognition up our collective spines - Canadians are polite, cautious, self-denigrating, etc. - in the attractive packaging of a quirky, original American voice.

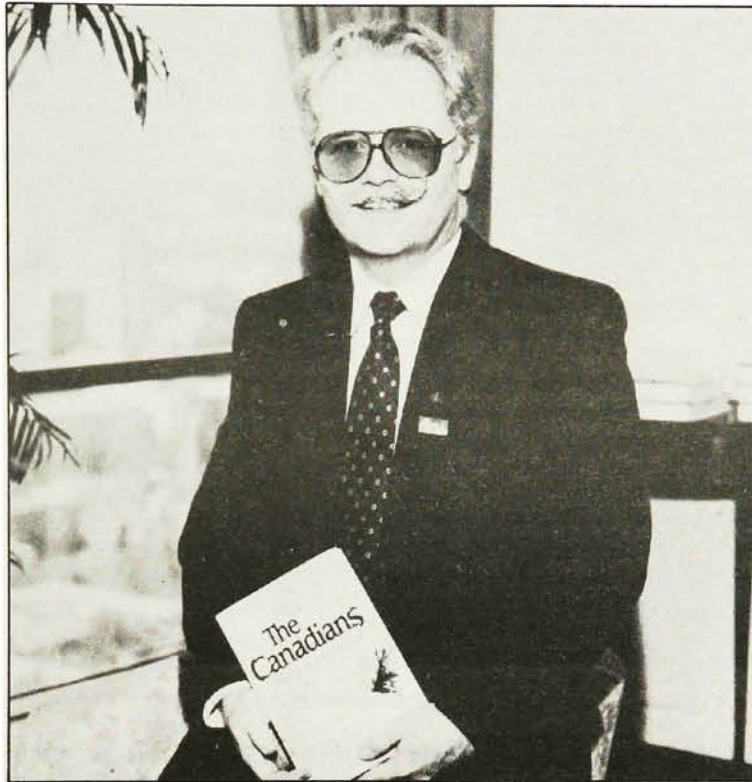
The irony is nowhere more telling than in the framing device for Part One, which opens and closes with a celebration of the Grey Cup. Here is "where east meets west," where "Canadians break out and become uncharacteristically loud, boisterous and plain drunk."

Meanwhile an oblivious Malcolm continues his tour of Canada while we wait expectantly for him to say something. After all anyone who can maintain such an extravagant facial apparatus as his regimental sergeant major handlebar moustache must be good for an idiosyncratic view of the world.

There is an attempt early in the program to suffuse the film with Malcolm's presence. We return with him to his ancestral haunts in Manitoba, meet old family friends and, in a series of recreated sepia-tinted scenes which have all the poignancy of a Kraft cheese commercial, see boy Malcolm treading his way along a railway track, no doubt CP, meandering through Canadian fields, turning trusting eyes towards grandpa as American youth searches for wisdom from the Canadian forebear.

Thereafter it's into the business of crisscrossing the country from east to west on the backs of unsuspecting participants. From an outpost wedding in Newfoundland to the self-satisfied maxims of rags-to-riches Vancouver immigrant, we are drawn what is the purported portrait of Canada. The people, the images, the stories blur in a relentlessly optimistic visual and narrative harangue.

Only at one point is television deflected from its omnivorous homogenizing appetite by an outpost woman who refuses to yield to television. She doesn't speak to camera, she speaks to herself, to her memory, to her people. Her story remains her own.



He of the handlebar moustache, Andrew Malcolm

It's a peculiarly Newfie story. In the '50s the provincial government decided it was economically unfeasible to maintain the outports. The solution - forcible resettlement.

The fishing boats were burned and all basic services were shut off to some 200 outports. Some refused to go, others drifted back to haunt their once thriving communities. After 20

years the government rented and services were restored. But the memory of the dislocation remains. The outpost woman remembers the bewilderment of her 80-year-old mother at having to move from where she had lived all her life. With a shock we realize this is also the story of the 20th century; it's the stories of refugees and the displaced; these outporters were Canada's own boat people.

That window closes. But while the program is off and trotting we remain riveted by the voice of the Mother Courage of the outports who through her particular strength of character has managed a remarkable Brechtian alienation to bypass the medium and touch us directly.

Part Two, an exploration of Canada-U.S. differences about which it has as much insight as the earlier part did into the realities of Canadian football, lacks even the single serendipitous epiphany that graced Part One.

The only time Malcolm is comfortable with his material is when he settles into a chat with fellow journalists and renegade Canadians, Morley Safer and Peter Jennings. What they have to say is not terribly interesting but at least it's watchable TV with an easy intimacy that makes us feel we're eavesdropping on watercooler gossip.

The hiatus is brief and it's back to the tedium of enunciating the tried and true differences between ourselves and our American cousins. Tom Perlmutter ●

THE CANADIANS d. Pierre Sarrazin exec. p. Michael Maclear, Ian McLeod. Produced by Cineworld. From the book The Canadians by Andrew H. Malcolm.

Entertainment Weekly advertisement for 'CINEMA CANADA' magazine. The ad features a large headline 'A passionate voice for Canadian film' and a photo of a man. Text includes 'CINEMA CANADA is an indispensable part of the cultural life of the nation...' and 'SUBSCRIBE TODAY (Use enclosed post card to order)'. The ad also contains smaller text about the magazine's history and content.