

The Permeable Border

How leading U.S. philanthropists helped
establish Canadian culture.

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**Rockefeller, Carnegie and Canada:
American Philanthropy and the Arts and
Letters in Canada**

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When most of us think about America's contribution to Canadian culture during the years before World War II, we think of church organs and public libraries. Yet in *Rockefeller, Carnegie and Canada: American Philanthropy and the Arts and Letters in Canada*, Jeffrey Brison shows us that American philanthropy functioned on a much broader scale. During the first half of the 20th century, U.S. dollars built the infrastructure for such institutions as the Canada Council, the Federation of Canadian Artists and the Humanities Research Council of Canada, along with many other public and private organizations. American money also founded and expanded departments of fine arts and music and schools of medicine. It enabled work by Canadian artists through shows such as the Exhibition of Contemporary Canadian Painting to be seen during the late 1930s in South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. It sent some of our most gifted art historians and artists on speaking tours in Canada and abroad. And it brought Canadian artists together in Kingston, Ontario, at the seminal Conference of Canadian Artists in June 1941.

The principal actors in Brison's story are John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie, who, as Brison puts it, built on the evolutionary ideology of Herbert Spencer and on Christian notions of stewardship, restructuring and rationalizing American society in the same way that they had reshaped industry in the late 19th century. Like Bill and Melinda Gates today, Rockefeller and Carnegie both took early retirement to promote the well-being of humankind and the diffusion of knowledge, and transformed their personal wealth into philanthropic trusts: the Rockefeller Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation. In

order to distribute their wealth, they hired a series of professional "philanthropoids" whose business it was to find the best individuals, methods and ways of organizing specific fields. This ushered in a new "scientific" form of patronage.

The Carnegie Corporation and the Rockefeller Foundation were active in Canada from their formation in 1911 and 1913 respectively. "Personal, professional, familial, and academic ties between the leaders of the foundations and the emerging secular network of reform-minded urban intellectuals in Canada," says Brison, "made the border between Canada and the United States, if not invisible, at least extremely permeable." As a result, much of the activity of both foundations outside of the U.S. initially focused on Canada. Aware that constitutional laws deemed financial assistance to Canadian universities to be a provincial rather than a federal concern, these trusts also attempted to fill the void created by the relatively lacklustre levels of provincial support. McGill, Dalhousie, Alberta and Toronto universities were early recipients of both general endowments and grants for specific faculties and programs. Medical faculties at Queen's University and the University of Western Ontario were left out in the cold in deference to the medical schools at nearby Toronto and McGill.

During the early years of the century, support was given to both central and peripheral cultural institutions with no less vigour. After conducting surveys of the country's cultural institutions, the foundations supported—or in some cases created—amateur cultural organizations and groups such as the Banff School of Fine Arts, the Alberta Folklore and Local History Project and the University of Saskatchewan's provincial archive, all in an effort to bolster regional consciousness and thereby defend local traditions.

Both foundations were equally committed to funding the country's museums and galleries. In an effort to centralize support to Canada's museums and galleries and to individual artists, the Carnegie Corporation established the Canadian Museums Committee. The committee, chaired by the director of the New Brunswick Museum, J. Clarence Webster, was really run by H.O. McCurry of the National Gallery of Canada. From 1933 to 1938 the committee solidified not only the infrastructure of a national culture in central Canada but ensured the dominance of the National Gallery in the visual arts. And when the Carnegie Corporation dissolved the committee in 1938, it fell to the National Gallery to run the trust's programs over the next few years.

As Brison astutely suggests, Carnegie and Rockefeller officials worked well with Canada's cultural bureaucrats because they were all committed to maintaining an economic, political and cultural dominance over a rapidly changing society. The antipathy that this enlightened class of individuals shared toward cultural modernism was best seen in Canada through their support of members of the Group of Seven, as well as cultural figures such as H.S. Southam, Eric Brown and Vincent Massey. Thus even Canada's most outspoken "anti-American," Vincent Massey, could tell the Carnegie Corporation's Frederick Keppel in 1934 that "thinking Americans are fighting gallantly against spiritual dangers which both they and we face: a distorted sense of values, the standardization of life, the worship of mere bulk for its own sake, the uncritical acceptance of the second-rate." In hitting this point home, Brison brilliantly shows the ways in which apparently anti-American anglo-Canadians could comfortably collaborate with elite representatives of American corporate philanthropy and thereby establish the cultural institutions that we have to this day. Brison makes a similar point with respect to Canadian scholarship. Not only did the Canadian Social Science Research Council and the Humanities Research Council of Canada both receive more than 90 percent of their funding from American philanthropy before their integration into the activities of the Canada Council in 1957, but Brison also shows to what extent the well-known anti-American nationalists Harold Innis and Donald Creighton benefited from funding they received from American foundations. What made this possible was the remarkable freedom that Rockefeller and Carnegie officials gave to Canadian scholars to pursue their own research agendas—even when these explicitly diverged from the continentalist notions that had originally spurred the American foundations' involvement in Canada.

The result, says Brison, is that the profound role played by private American philanthropy up until the 1950s in shaping what he calls "official public culture in Canada" has remained effectively hidden:

It is a testament both to the desire and ability of the American foundations to cloak their influence with ingenious disguises and to the chauvinism of nationalist historians that the history of Canadian cultural structures has been so effectively "cleansed" of this element of American cultural imperialism. It is as if "arts and letters" was the one aspect of Canadian culture too pure for American influence to sully.

Such insights give Brison's book an enduring value. At the same time, however, this book has all the hallmarks of a thesis-turned-into-a-book. The writing is turgid. There is no attempt to make the principal actors come alive. And the focus on the subject is so close that many questions are left unanswered. In what ways, for example, did American funding help organizations such as the Banff School of Fine Arts? Did American funding inhibit the emergence of a class of Canadian philanthropists? And what about the extent of cultural dependence on Britain? Brison seems to have left these questions on the shelf.

Even so, he has given all students of Canada's cultural history a new and refreshing way of viewing cultural activity in this country during the first half of the 20th century. ☐

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