

A Review of H.V. Nelles, *A Little History of Canada*. Ontario, Oxford University Press, 2004. xi, 268p.

Scott Infanger, Vanderbilt University

*A Little History of Canada* is an enormous project on a small scale. As the title of the work and the diminutive size of the book seem to establish, H.V. Nelles provides an “interpretive essay” of Canadian history, structured “around a series of from-to transitions.” (vi) The book is written for three audiences: first, Canadians looking for a brief introduction to the history of their country; second, tourists and other visitors to Canada who would like an understanding of the country they are visiting; and third, Canada’s immigrant population, which, according to Nelles continues at the rate of 200,000 immigrants per year.

Nelles admits that it is not his purpose to write a textbook and he tries to reduce the number of names and dates that so often accompany a history text. He offers many broad brush-strokes of history, with each chapter identified by periods of relative stability. What is important in this work are the ideas, not the dates, and although Nelles follows a general chronology throughout the book, he often lunges forward with an idea and then steps back in history to trace out another idea. Nelles opens the work with a metaphor that he uses as a guide for the important ideas of his book: the Transformation Mask. This type of mask, used by the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Coast possesses several layers that portray different images hidden behind one another. The wearer pulls on a set of strings to open the mask and reveal the new identity. Armed with this metaphor, Nelles begins his “Little History.”

Any study of the history of North America will reveal the intertwined nature of the United States and Canada, and Nelles casually incorporates this throughout his book. In 1663, when France finally decided to invest in its North American possessions, it established a real colony by shipping 800 women from France’s orphanages and hospices, giving them a modest dowry and labeling them “Daughters of the King.” They were then eligible and appealing spouses for the men in the colony. This effort was successful and laid the groundwork for what is present-day Quebec, which, despite efforts for independence or inclusion depending on the political atmosphere of the time, remains a peculiar province, an island of French Catholic culture in an otherwise Anglo-dominated nation.

The French colonies, dedicated to trapping and fur-trading extended south along the Mississippi River, and those colonists interacted regularly with the American colonists. The American Revolutionary War involved Canada in several ways, not the least of which was the desire of the newly independent government of the United States to absorb the whole of Canadian territory into its nation.

Perhaps one of the most commonly misunderstood (or at least underappreciated) histories in the Americas is that of the birth of Canada as a nation. Nelles dedicates the greatest part of his book to the chapter “Dominion Limited” in which he meanders through the birth of Canada as a nation and punctuates it with the American Revolutionary and Civil Wars, and both World Wars. The American Revolutionary and Civil Wars are paramount in the history of the United States, but Nelles includes them in Canada’s history as important events that affected the way in which Canadian government functioned, if only as a result of learning from its nearest neighbor. Between

the conflicts involving the United States, Nelles recounts brief skirmishes and even bloody battles that occurred in the traditionally peaceful nation, but then states that “in Canada revolutions fail as action, but triumph in recollection and history.” (107) With his broad brush-strokes, Nelles maintains Canada’s image as a nation preferring “civilized negotiation over revolution” (171), one that was content to look at Confederation more as a “business arrangement than an affair of the heart.” (138)

Notwithstanding Canada’s image as a peaceful nation, Nelles continues to look at military struggles as defining points in Canada’s national history, with WWI and WWII profoundly impacting the nation. The delicate balance between French and English Canada was nearly destroyed completely in WWI when Canada imposed conscription to fulfill its military obligation to the war. Before WWII, Canada’s Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King swore that Canada’s involvement in the war would not result in conscription once again. He was unable to keep this promise, but through extensive political maneuvering, was able to delay Canada’s draft until nearly the end of the war. But more significant than the draft was Canada’s coming of age during WWII. The welfare state of Canada that began humbly in the aftermath of WWI became the enormous machine that would define it throughout the twentieth century as a natural result of Canadian government assuming responsibility during the war. With the enormous government machine accounted for, Nelles proceeds to his defining moment in Canadian history.

Throughout the work, Nelles refers to Canada’s dependence on British legislation as the supreme law of the land. Under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, Canada petitioned the British House of Commons to change the terms of the British North America Act and put the rule of Canada at last in the hands of Canadians. The great date of Canadian independence, 17 April 1982, slips quietly past the reader as Nelles describes how the Queen may have felt when signing the new Canadian Constitution. In a book that is structured around avoiding dates, it is apparent that Nelles believes this event to be paramount in Canadian history, although the nature of the subject matter forces him to reserve it to the end of the work.

The remaining pages of the book look at the way in which Canada has become one of the most cosmopolitan nations in the world. Even at this point, Nelles’s declarations and ideas are for the most part simple and unassuming, not surprisingly reflective of Canadian culture and identity. Yes, Nelles has produced a “lively and opinionated little history of a very big country,” but outside of the few moments in which Nelles’ makes bold claims about defining moments, moments in which he recalls the metaphor of the Transformation Mask, he is content to provide a peaceful, pleasant, panoramic picture of one of the quietest nations in the Americas.