

NATIVES AND NATIONALISM: TRAVELLING THE COUNTRY, 'THINGS SUDDENLY MAKE SENSE TO YOU'

This native land: Our debt to the first nations

Writer and thinker John Ralston Saul feels Canada can't understand its true nature until it reconnects with its aboriginal roots. He discusses his vision with *The Globe and Mail's* Michael Valpy

MICHAEL VALPY AND JOHN RALSTON SAUL
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This is John Ralston Saul at work, thinking big. If you've got only one life to lead, why not spend it retelling your country's history, recasting its mythologies, completely reframing the society to which Canadians belong?

His new book, *A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada*, says our multiculturalism did not begin with the French and English trying to figure out how to live with each other. It began with illiterate, impoverished Europeans coming into contact with superior aboriginal societies and being accepted by them.

Canada's political culture of egalitarianism, and Canadians' constitutional genius for balancing collective and individual rights, did not begin with Confederation or Pierre Trudeau's Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

They began with the Great Peace of Montreal in 1701 when 39 first nations signed an extraordinary treaty with the governor of New France that brought years of economic harmony and wealth, mutual respect and a commitment by the French - alone among the European colonists of North America - not to exterminate or enslave indigenous peoples.

Print Edition - Section Front



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There has never been a monolithic society on the northern half of the continent, which is why the imperial British rulers of the late 18th century treated Canada differently from their other possessions - promulgating the Royal Proclamation of 1763 that guaranteed cultural and economic rights for aboriginal people, and the Quebec Act of 1774 that guaranteed language and legal rights for French Canadians.

That, Mr. Saul says, was Canada's true history until it was hijacked by empire supremacists in the 19th century and rewritten, resulting in a shredding of our unique social cohesion that has lasted to today.

But he finds hope. The old narrative is resurfacing, which is what his book is about: a rediscovery of the true Canada.

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said trying to fix a broken myth is like trying to repair a broken spider web. I'm wondering if that's what you're trying to do.

I don't think that we have a broken myth. I think we have something much more interesting and actually fun in a way. We've got a 400-year-old history, which is a long time, and the first 250 years are more or less - I'm not being romantic - about how we're going to live in this country, how we're going to do things, the collective unconscious put in place.

And then in the late 19th century, after Confederation, in the 1880s, the 1890s, you get this kidnapping of

Canada by the [British] empire myth, the massive arrival of the northern Irish Protestants and the big arrival of the English, who probably wouldn't have caused much of a change if the northern Irish hadn't pushed so hard. And, of course, why wouldn't you want to be on the winning side, when the empire was going to live forever? So, in a way, they rewrote the surface mythology of Canada. You and I are still struggling with the leftover of that.

I read your thesis kind of doubtfully until I got to the part where you present the Royal Proclamation of 1763 and the Quebec Act of 1774 side by side. And for the first time I realized, my god, the British imperial rulers really were dealing with three peoples, not just two - the aboriginals as well as the French and British.

And remember that astonishing thing which is never talked about, the Great Peace of Montreal in 1701. ... And you know the rewriting of our history in the late 19th century was so complete that all of this stuff was evacuated because the aboriginals were dying of our diseases and the people with power wanted them to die. Even if they weren't doing it on purpose, they wanted them to die, [which introduced] the whole mythology that this was a weak people. All that stuff is a very clear, very self-serving mythology because they plummeted from two million to 200,000 by the early 20th century.

Was our history really rewritten?

Yes. If you went today to John A. Macdonald and George-Étienne Cartier [Canada's first prime minister and his Quebec lieutenant] and called them up, and said, "So, tell me about Canada," the first thing they'd say probably is, "Look, we've got a lot of difficulties, but essentially Lafontaine and Baldwin [Louis-Hippolyte Lafontaine and Robert Baldwin, architects of the Canadian state] got it right and these are the great men of Canadian history and we are attempting to do what they started putting in place."

Then, you know, 25 or so years later, you've got people saying the history of Canada begins with John A. Macdonald, not even George-Étienne Cartier, and of course the aboriginals are invisible and it's all about Macdonald and Britain. It's a complete rewriting of history. This is not the way they imagined it.

What launched you on this?

I think I work my way through things. I'm just gradually working my way through these ideas. I was already on my way, but I think it was those six years travelling around the country [as husband of then-governor-general Adrienne Clarkson] and suddenly seeing thousands and thousands and thousands of people across the country ... hearing what they had to say; you know, sitting down with [Nisga'a leader] Joe Gosnell and [Haida leader] Guujaaw. These are remarkable people, these are some of the most remarkable people in the country. When you meet them, you think, 'So, that's what a leader is supposed to look like.' "

And then you go on from them, and being impressed by them, and suddenly seeing the country through a whole new prism?

But you know, I've been thinking about this book for about a decade. And it takes a long time to actually think your way through something, and then you do the research and you discover all sorts of things, and things suddenly make sense to you.

I mean I always knew about the Great Peace of Montreal, but I hadn't got a big enough context for it. Actually, there's a line right through our history. Suddenly you see there is an explanation for what happened in the 1970s [with the emergence of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms] that was never understandable before.

We just say, "Oh, thanks to Trudeau we became sophisticated and worldly." Really? Is that how it works? Napoleon comes along and we change?

I don't think so. What happened in the 1970s was the picking up on this great, largely subterranean strain that runs from the great circle idea of the aboriginal, is picked up by the French Canadians and the Hudson's Bay Company and the [United Empire] Loyalists, and then it joins in with the peace, welfare and good government strain, and you see it with Lafontaine, and then suddenly it resurfaces, completely. And we're there. That's the way history works. I mean every country has several strains and some of them are unpleasant, on the surface or underneath, and some of them are very interesting.

I'm sure you've encountered some of the first nations and Métis scholars at places like University of

Saskatchewan who have gone back into their history and found it's not at all what we read in books, with a dominant European group running things and inferior aboriginals. But in fact the first contacts were partnerships of full equals.

Absolutely. That's what I'm saying. You know, I gave this speech in Paris for the opening of a conference organized by the French and Canadian senates on the 400th anniversary of Quebec City. And I was trying out these ideas because the book wasn't quite finished. I was talking about the key role of the aboriginals, and you could see everybody was nodding and the French were looking surprised, but they quite liked it because it wasn't too disturbing.

And then I said, "Look, just so you understand me clearly, what this means is these French Canadians who were basically poverty-stricken, illiterate, and these Hudson's Bay Company people and other anglophones who were, you know, poor kids from the Orkneys, the reason they married aboriginals is because they were marrying up. The aboriginals were marrying down." Then they stopped nodding. The idea that the European could marry up by marrying indigenous had never occurred to them, and they weren't very comfortable with it.

And so I said, "Look, what is the definition of marrying up? First of all, you marry money, you marry influence, you marry business, you marry comfort, you marry housing, you marry food and you marry looks."

I just defined what these rather simple Europeans were doing when they married chiefs' daughters, and learned how to eat, learned how to live and got influence into a large trading structure and had a wife who spoke three or four languages and therefore could speak for them - and that's called marrying up.

Well, their jaws were dropping.

Michael Valpy is a writer with The Globe and Mail.

Excerpt from

John Ralston Saul's

A Fair Country

When Canadians are asked - as citizens, not as representatives of interest groups or as employees - what lies at the heart of their civilization, they are most likely to reply: fairness and inclusion. This response cuts easily across what are often presented as dividing lines of aboriginal and non-aboriginal, francophone and anglophone, established and new citizens.

What is fascinating about the first principles of fairness and inclusion is how much energy such intentional ideas produce. Compare two recent studies driven by these ethics, on the one hand, with the expensive and long federal government study on corporate hollowing-out, on the other.

The Community Foundations of Canada and the Law Commission looked at what was holding immigrants back. In 50 pages, they laid out a clear analysis and a clear and doable program. Not too complicated. Not expensive. Dealing with every aspect of society. Any government could take the recommendations in this study and solve the problems.

Equally, a six-part study in 2008 by The Globe and Mail analyzed and laid out a program for the mental-health crisis in Canada. Again, the 12 solutions are doable, and touch everyone from schools to government to the business community and the universities to citizen groups. You feel the energy, the desire for problem solving, in every word.

Then you turn to the lengthy, year-long study commissioned by the federal government from a group of senior industry managers on the crisis in corporate hollowing-out. The central theme is what everyone should do for the business community. There is scarcely a word about what they themselves should do. It is mainly a moan for less taxation, less regulation and more support.

In a country that has more foreign ownership than in any other democracy, their solution is to lower barriers in order to encourage more foreign ownership in order to encourage a competitive spirit. They don't explain why what hasn't worked in to now would work if pushed further.

Within a week of the hollowing-out report, a major Paris magazine ran a long interview with Paul Desmarais Sr., chair of Power Corp., one of Canada's largest investment groups. You sense his long-term view. You may agree or disagree with his opinions, but this is what a business leader - indeed, a capitalist - is supposed to sound like.

Then turn back to the lugubrious managerial report on hollowing-out, and it's as if you've fallen into another world. One is active, the other passive. One wants to control, shape, carry its power around the world. The other wants stock options, and thinks a meeting in New York is an assertion of global ambitions.

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