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“Identities are not like hats”: Reflections on Identity Change, Dutch to Canadian

In 2004 the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, with which CAANS meets annually, met at the University of Manitoba and had as its theme “Confluence: ideas, identities, place”. Quite possibly inspired by Winnipeg’s origins at the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, the theme invited reflection about Canadian-ness, for the population of this country has “flowed together” from an increasing number of other countries. How have they modified or shed their former national identity to become Canadian – and in changing, what have they changed into? What has this meant for people who have their origins in the Netherlands?

I tried to address the process of becoming Canadian in my book *Becoming Canadian: Memoirs of an Invisible Immigrant*. In it I asked the question: “In becoming Canadian, what did I become? ... What is a Canadian? The simple answer is ‘a resident of Canada who has Canadian citizenship.’ As a legal definition this is fine, but in a country of immigrants it unavoidably strikes many people as being too simple. Does being Canadian mean conforming to a Canadian type and accepting Canadian values? And if so, what are they?”¹ Questions like this are bound to come up in

any study, whether individual or more general, of the adaptation of immigrants to their host country.

In an overview of Dutch immigration and adaptation to Canada, Herman Ganzevoort writes: “Few immigrants purposely abandoned the past or wholeheartedly accepted the Canadian way, yet by simply being in Canada they were changed. While most of the first generation never did become completely Canadianized, they also never remained wholly Dutch. They became transitional in character.”² Most of us will intuitively recognize truth in these lines. Yet the questions remain. What is “the Canadian way”?

More than one eminent Canadian historian has over the years addressed the issue of Canadian identity. Forty-five years ago, W. L. Morton, then of the University of Manitoba, published four essays as a book with the title *The Canadian Identity*. As Morton saw it, this identity was rooted in several ineluctable facts: first, the country’s northernness; second, the cultural duality that took shape in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; third, its history as a British dependency; fourth, its retention of the British monarchy

even after independence had been achieved; fifth, its continued membership in the British Commonwealth; and sixth, its proximity to the United States. Seeking a theme in Canadian history, he found it in "endurance and survival." The lessons of our history, he wrote, were two: "One is that the only real victories are the victories over defeat. We have been beaten many times ... but we survive and we go on in strength. And our experience teaches also that what is important is not to have triumphed, but to have endured."³ (The sceptical observer may say that this is making a virtue of necessity). Morton felt that the preservation of a national society in which "two major cultures and many smaller ones" lived together was "not the unique mission of Canada." However, he concluded, "it is the central fact of Canadian history that it has been preserved and elaborated by Canadians in one of the largest, harshest, and most intimidating countries on earth. Canada, that is, has preserved and confirmed the essentials of the greatest of civilizations in the grimmest of environments."⁴

A few years later Ramsay Cook, a member of the University of Toronto History department though about to move to York University, restated the issue of identity. Morton, it seemed, had not persuaded everybody back in 1960, for by 1967, the centennial of Confederation, there was a good deal of hand-wringing about the absence of a clearly defined Canadian identity. Cook did not share this alarm. "Perhaps instead of constantly deploring our lack of identity," he wrote, "we should attempt to understand and explain the regional, ethnic and class identities that we do have ... It might just be that it is in these limited identities that 'Canadianism' is found, and that except for our over-heated nationalist intel-

lectuals Canadians find this situation quite satisfactory."⁵

Soon afterwards the University of Toronto's J. M. S. Careless took up Cook's suggestion. Offering two quite different accounts, both plausible, of the course and significance of Canadian history from the Laurier years into the 1960s, one written from a centralist and the other from a regionalist point of view, Careless asked how the Canadian experience was to be discerned and defined. Much of that experience, he answered, lay in the "limited identities" identified by Cook. "These represent entities of experience for Canadians no less than the transcontinental federal union; indeed, it is largely through them that Canadians interpret their nation-state as a whole."⁶ These factors were evident in other countries as well, and they had not escaped notice by Canadians. "But what is still needed is more study of their roles in this country of relatively weak nationalizing forces: a land of two languages, pluralized politics, and ethnic multiplicity, yet all so far contained within one distinctive frame of nation-state existence."⁷

In the year 2000, Cook returned to the subject that had first engaged him in the mid-1960s. The limited-identities hypothesis had proved to be useful, he wrote, but its limits also needed to be highlighted. "Identities, limited or unlimited, local or national, are neither hermetically sealed nor easily defined. Their edges are always fuzzy and shifting ... Identities are not essential but contingent, constructed and deconstructed by changing historical circumstances."⁸ He went on to make a further remark that is of particular relevance to a group like the Dutch-Canadians: "A little reflection, a little common sense,

makes it obvious that no region is only a region, for it contains classes, ethnic groups, and genders; nor is any ethnic community only that, for it has its divisions, too. Regions, groups, and individuals have several identities."⁹ He quotes the British-born historian Linda Colley: "Identities are not like hats. Human beings can and do put on several at a time."¹⁰

How true this is of Dutch immigrants to Canada emerges from the book by Ganzevoort, from Anne van Arragon Hutten's engaging survey of post-war immigrant children, as well as from Will C. van den Hoonaard's study of Dutch settlers in New Brunswick.¹¹ But no author sheds more light on the complexities of Dutch-Canadian identity than Frans J. Schryer in his book on the Dutch in Ontario. His chapter on "Dutch-Canadian Dispositions: Identity and Culture" is a finely nuanced and skillfully presented depiction of the variations among Dutch immigrants and the ambiguities they feel in trying to place themselves within the host society.¹²

Probably the most important variable influencing the process of identity change, Schryer finds, is the identity that immigrants felt they had in the Netherlands. Most Dutch migration to Canada took place during the fifteen years after the Second World War, a time when social stratification and division into religious or political groupings (*verzuiling*)¹³ were still much in evidence. As well, regional and class identities were real and strong. Frisians had a particularly strong sense of geographical and linguistic identity, but regional identities existed in other parts of the Netherlands as well.

The five *zuilen* were orthodox Calvinist, more

liberally Protestant, Catholic, labour/social democrat, and secular Liberal/religiously neutral. They were strongly present in politics, with proportional representation guaranteeing that each group would get its fair representation in Parliament. Each had its own labour unions, employer associations, voluntary organizations, and news media, in the newspaper world but most notably in broadcasting. Schryer writes that a central finding of his study of Canadians of Dutch background "is that postwar immigrants from the Netherlands replicated many structural features of Dutch society, despite a high level of linguistic assimilation and weak ethnic identity."¹⁴

This last phrase is important. One key feature of the Dutch-Canadian experience has in fact been a rapid weakening of Dutch identity, even in the first generation. The main reason for this is surely the high degree of acceptance and low level of discrimination experienced by Netherlanders. In the early 1970s K. G. O'Bryan, J. G. Reitz and O. Kuplowska surveyed ten ethnic groups in five Canadian metropolitan centres. Fully 88 per cent of the Dutch sample responded that "discrimination by employers [was] not a problem."¹⁵ The only other group with a response as high were the Scandinavians.¹⁶ The survey did not include a question concerning discrimination in other contexts, but I suspect that only a small minority of Netherlanders would have expressed concern. Language retention among Dutch-Canadians was found to be relatively low, but this did not worry many of the immigrant group. Some 35.2 per cent of them were indifferent to the retention of the Dutch language, and almost 15 percent thought it was actually undesirable.¹⁷ Well over half did not think the decreasing use of

the Dutch language was a problem at all, and a further 10 percent did not think it was a serious problem.¹⁸

And so it seems that one feature of Dutchness in Canada is that first-generation immigrants were not much concerned to be recognizably Dutch, or to keep their language, but they strongly tended to continue to observe social class distinctions they brought with them from the Netherlands. One might have expected differential material success in Canada to have made such distinctions largely or entirely irrelevant. The second and more significant feature has been the persistence of Dutch Calvinism, due both to religious conviction and the continuing tendency for those of orthodox Calvinist background to marry endogamously, within the group.

Schryer in particular offers a wealth of evidence of the survival of class consciousness,¹⁹ and he, Ganzevoort, Van den Hoonaard, and Van Arragon Hutten all attest to the second tendency, the persistence of a Dutch-Canadian identity among orthodox Calvinists, and to a definite though lesser extent among Roman Catholics settling in south-western Ontario. Immigrants who are *Gereformeerd* and especially *Christelijk Gereformeerd* have been overwhelmingly likely to join one of the Reformed churches. As a result, our four authors claim, they have maintained a group identity to a degree far greater than that shown by Catholic immigrants or by those who are *Hervormd*, Baptist, Lutheran, Jewish and so on, to say nothing of those without any religious affiliation. Ganzevoort wrote in the late 1980s: "Even though the Christian Reformed church members make up less than one-fifth of the Dutch-Canadian group, they have had an effect on the community out

of all proportion to their membership. The reason lies in their solidarity and their identification as a 'Dutch' church."²⁰

Ganzevoort raised the question of how large the total Dutch-Canadian community was, opting for a number between 300,000 and 330,000.²¹ As an estimate of the number of Canadians of Dutch or partly Dutch ancestry at that time, the number was probably accurate. As an estimate of the number who felt a Dutch or Dutch-Canadian identity, it seems high. As for the situation today, outside Calvinist circles there does not seem to be much of a Dutch-Canadian "community" in any meaningful sense of the term. There are organizations, like the successful DUCA credit union in central Ontario, that have their origins in the post-war wave of immigration, but they are often no longer identifiably Dutch-Canadian. In several Canadian cities, Dutch-born Canadians and expatriate Netherlanders continue to meet in groups like Toronto's Netherlands Luncheon Club, but what draws them together may have as much to do with the opportunities these clubs offer for business and professional networking as with ethnicity.²² The same may be true of the receptions held everywhere that the Netherlands has diplomatic representation to mark the Dutch Queen's birthday on April 30, to which a number of people of Dutch background are invited.²³

The scepticism about the existence of a coherent Dutch-Canadian community evident in the works by Ganzevoort and Schryer happens to accord with my own views, but the latter are affected also by the identity change that began for me in the early 1950s, when I was a teenager growing up in Victoria, B.C. Several years before our parents

became Canadian citizens, my brothers and I were speaking to each other in English. Our parents knew and associated with a few other people of Dutch background whose social status in the Netherlands matched their own, but we boys had virtually no contact with other Dutch-born children. The churches we attended were first Anglican, later United. Our friends, including girlfriends, in high school and later in university, were virtually all Canadian born and of Anglo-Celtic origin. Between high school and university I worked for a Canadian bank, where being identified as a foreigner or an immigrant conferred no advantage whatsoever. When I entered university in 1958, I still had a trace of an accent; my older brother's accent was a bit more noticeable, while my younger brothers had none left. My own accent was usually recognized and identified only by other ex-Netherlanders who had been in Canada long enough to have developed an ear for accents in English. My professional, social, and private lives have all been carried on almost entirely in English. Naturally I still have an interest in the Netherlands and the Dutch language, and I am sure that the fact of having been born and lived the first twelve years of my life in the Netherlands have marked me in significant ways. In that sense I have not ceased to be Dutch, but my primary identity is Canadian.²⁴ More specifically, I am an older, urban, middle-class, educated, non-religious, politically uncommitted, cosmopolitan Canadian. Some of these features are no doubt carried over from my background in the Netherlands: urban, middle-class, loosely religious, politically near the centre.

As I interpret Ganzevoort and Schryer, children of an immigrant background like mine and that of my brothers generally had an

experience similar to ours. Facing little or nothing in the way of prejudice, they blended easily into mainstream Canadian culture and fairly soon adopted one of the various Canadian identities on offer. Among these, a hyphenated Dutch-Canadian identity soon became a minority choice, except to Calvinists. The chief agencies in the process of assimilation were the public school system, the non-Dutch churches, and especially the institution of marriage. Committed Calvinists have tended to marry among themselves or bring their spouses into the Reformed church, which has reinforced a separate Dutch-Canadian identity. Other Netherlanders, whether churchgoers or not, have tended to marry outside their group. This makes it hard to maintain an immigrant identity, and does nothing to encourage the retention of the Dutch language, or to encourage children born in Canada to learn it. Ganzevoort thinks that the reason for the low interest in Dutch is "not clear", but he adds that "it seems to be related directly to a value judgment on the part of the immigrants as to the usefulness of the Dutch language in their new homeland."²⁵ Of course, if a language is not used regularly, one's command of it decreases over time; the failure to use Dutch and a declining interest in it reinforce each other. K. G. O'Bryan and his associates noted that 9.8 percent of the second generation of Dutch-Canadian respondents claimed fluency in Dutch, but only 0.8 percent of the third generation did.²⁶ It seems very likely that most of the second- and third-generation claimants belonged to one of the Calvinist churches.

Thus far I have written about my own experiences and about what I am led, by them and from my reading, to conclude about the issue of identity change. However, other

Dutch children had different experiences, especially, as is evident in the study by Anne van Arragon Hutten, those who grew up in a Calvinist milieu, but also Catholic children in rural Ontario.²⁷ And there is some evidence that, especially among lapsed Calvinists who have had a university education, there are not a few who are trying to recover their Dutch roots, reflecting a rising interest in their roots among immigrants all over North America. In one way or another these people seek to recover a Dutch-Canadian identity for them and for their children. One sees more Dutch names given to third-generation children than to second: Willem, Tys, Marijke, Annelies.²⁸ There seems to be a healthy interest in Dutch language classes (where they are available) among young people who (among other things) want to visit "the old country" and talk to their relatives there.

As Ramsay Cook indicated, the issue of identity change is a complex matter. Except for those who belong to the Reformed churches or were raised in them even though they have subsequently left them, most people of Dutch stock are likely to identify themselves as Canadian or primarily Canadian by the second and certainly the third generation. However, the specific meaning given to this varies from person to person. Many possible permutations of identity change exist between Dutch and Canadian. It is permissible to see the change as a process about which one can generalize if one wishes, but one that is in some sense unique to each individual, so that description is possible while analysis remains elusive.

NOTES

¹ Michiel Horn: *Becoming Canadian: Memoirs of an Invisible Immigrant*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997, 301-2.

² Herman Ganzevoort: *A Bittersweet Land: The Dutch Experience in Canada, 1890-1980*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988, 116.

³ W. L. Morton: *The Canadian Identity*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965 [1961], 112.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 113-4.

⁵ Ramsay Cook, "Canadian Centennial Celebrations," *International Journal*, 22. No. 4 (Autumn 1967), 663.

⁶ J. M. S. Careless, "'Limited Identities' in Canada," *Canadian Historical Review*, 50. No.1 (March 1969), 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Ramsay Cook, "Identities are not like Hats," *Canadian Historical Review*, 81, no. 2 (June 2000), 264.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 265. A fascinating view of the differences that region and age group in Canada can make to one's values and self-identification is available in the recent book by Michael Adams, *Fire and Ice: The United States, Canada and the Myth of Converging Values*, Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2003.

¹⁰ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging a Nation, 1707-1837*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992, 6.

¹¹ Ganzevoort, *A Bittersweet Land*; Anne van Arragon Hutten, *Uprooted: Dutch Immigrant Children in Canada 1947-1959*, Kentville, N.S.: North Mountain Press, 2001; Will C. van den Hoonaard, *Silent Ethnicity: The Dutch of New Brunswick*, Fredericton: New Ireland Press, 1991, 42-5.

¹² Frans J. Schryer, *The Netherlandic Presence in Ontario: Pillars, Class and Dutch Ethnicity*, Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1998, 278-92.

¹³ J. P. Kruijt, "The Netherlands: The Influence of Denominationalism on Social Life and Organizational Patterns," in Kenneth McRae, ed., *Consociational Democracy: Political Accommodation in Segmented Societies*, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974, 131.

¹⁴ Schryer, *The Netherlandic Presence in Ontario*, 23.

¹⁵ K. G. O'Bryan, J. G. Reitz, O. Kuplowska, *Non-official Languages: A Study in Canadian Multiculturalism*, Ottawa: Minister Responsible for Multiculturalism, 1975, 178. The other nine groups were Chinese, German, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Scandinavian and Ukrainian.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 185.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 170. The only other group with similar numbers were, once again, the Scandinavians.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹⁹ Schryer, *The Netherlandic Presence in Ontario*, 177-98.

²⁰ Ganzevoort, *A Bittersweet Land*, 115.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 116.

²² When I was asked to address the Netherlands Luncheon Club in 1985 on the role of the Canadian Army in the liberation of the Netherlands, it was made clear to me that I should speak in English, since some of the members had a hard time understanding Dutch!

²³ There is also CAANS, of course, but Ganzevoort stated in 1988: "The larger Dutch community seems to have placed little value in its undertakings" (*A Bittersweet Land*, 127). Perhaps not, but for 35 years it has kept the loyalty of a body of non-academic people, an unusual achievement for an academic association.

²⁴ Horn, *Becoming Canadian*, 298-308.

²⁵ Ganzevoort, *A Bittersweet Land*, 116.

²⁶ O'Bryan et al., *Non-official Languages*, 109. Of the second-generation respondents only those of Ukrainian stock claimed a higher percentage; the Polish claimed the same percentage as the Dutch. Of third-generation respondents, only the Polish group claimed a higher percentage.

²⁷ Van Arragon Hutten, *Uprooted*, passim. She is herself Calvinist, and many of the respondents to her survey are as well.

²⁸ Hermina Joldersma to Michiel Horn, August 19, 2005.