



A History of Canadian Culture

Jonathan Vance

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From Dorset sculpture to traveling circuses to the Barenaked Ladies, award-winning historian Jonathan Vance reveals a storyteller's ear for narrative.

In a country of unparalleled diversity, "culture" has many different shades of importance and meaning. A stranded Innu woman found by eighteenth-century explorers in the wind-swept Arctic took the time to decorate her clothing with rich designs. The explorers were taken aback; but Vance informs us that the Inuit word meaning "to make poetry" is the same as the word for "breathe"; and both derive from the word for "the soul." Unsurprisingly, Aboriginal culture began to change with the arrival of more Europeans (who brought their own ideas about culture) in one of the many complicated and intertwined tales that Vance weaves together to explore Canada's cultural history.

Vance considers other key issues. Where, for example, is the divide between "culture" and mass entertainment? He describes plays created by sailors trapped in an ice-bound ship through the Arctic winter; "occasionally lewd" tavern music; an early version of Macbeth with a Monty Pythonesque twist--in Canada, so-called high and low culture have coexisted uneasily, and intermingled creatively.

Vance reveals that the hot-button cultural issues we all know and love--government funding for the arts, the cultural brain drain, the drive to preserve distinctly Canadian forms of expression, concerns over copyright protection, the economic impact of cultural industries--can be traced back to previous centuries. Taking into account both the past and modern developments, such as the thriving culture of Quebec and the evolution of the CBC, Vance addresses one of the quintessential anxieties of Canadians--where, and what, is our culture?

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