Anti-Americanism: Opiate of the Masses?


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Former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau once remarked that being the United States' neighbour resembled sleeping with an elephant; the punch line, of course, that "No matter how friendly and even-tempered the beast, one is affected by every twitch and grunt." Such familiarity has bred contempt in the hearts of Canadians for as long as the two countries have existed—or has it? In Yankee Go Home? Canadians and Anti-Americanism, J.L. Granatstein argues that Canadians' treasured anti-Americanism, for some the basis of their national identity, is in fact simply a tool employed by political and economic élites "bent on preserving or enhancing their power" (x). As in Granatstein's other works, the "unreconstructed irredentists on the Marxist left" also bear their share of the blame; in this case, as the last bastion of anti-capitalist thought, needlessly spreading fear among the masses with their talk of "American imperialism" (282). Unfortunately, such biases prevent Granatstein from realizing the extent to which anti-Americanism can be a symbiotic or even a bottom-up, rather than top-down, process; an error that casts considerable doubt on his conclusions.

Granatstein focuses on the development of the Canadian-American relationship from the American Revolution to the present, placing the greatest emphasis on the post-World War II period. Throughout, he concerns himself chiefly with matters of foreign policy (especially Canada-United States diplomacy during the 1950s and the Vietnam War) and political and economic nationalism (focusing most notably on the debate over free trade in the late 1980s). Since Granatstein has enjoyed a long and distinguished career as a conservative political historian, it is not surprising that Yankee Go Home? invariably favours political and élite topics. Noting, however, that Granatstein's stated goal is to discuss "the roots of Canadian attitudes to the United States [and] to show how they have evolved," his omission of popular sources is a major flaw (x). For example, his discussion of the widespread imposition of American culture since World War II is flawed and incomplete. There is no assessment of the roles of Canadian and American media in the climate of rising cultural imperialism, nor, indeed, of the role of popular culture itself—at least not until the conclusion, when Budweiser beer and the Toronto Blue Jays rate mentions. For the most part, Granatstein seems out of touch with what the average Canadian (or American) reads, watches, and consumes. To present a balanced assessment of North American literature, one must discuss Stephen King and Danielle Steel along with Margaret Atwood and Mordecai Richler; Granatstein fails to do so. He argues that "Every day, in every way, Canada, like the world, becomes outwardly more American," but, without a discussion of popular culture, he is unable to convincingly explain why and how (278).

Even Granatstein's discussions of politics—the topic with which he is most comfortable—seem as if they have been cut to fit his thesis. He maintains, for example, that Canadian corporations, who clearly had a vested interest in maintaining high tariff walls, continually scuttled reciprocity negotiations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Perhaps, however, Canadian workers deserve some credit for realizing the disastrous consequences that reciprocity would have had on the labour force, causing factories to be closed and families to be driven to the United States or to welfare. Although corporate Canada, for its part, certainly embarked upon a large-scale propaganda campaign, working-class Canadians needed very little prodding. They feared, as they always had, a close relationship with the United States, feeling that "the country's national existence and national honour were at stake" (51). Granatstein also notes the "extraordinary public response" to the suicide of Canadian diplomat Herbert Norman (who had been under investigation by the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee) without realizing that it was this groundswell of support that led to Prime Minister John Diefenbaker's public statement denouncing the Americans' "witch-hunting proclivities," rather than the other way around (116-117). Once again, Canadians saw the United States as the enemy, the ogre that threatened their sovereignty and their way of life. Clearly, then, anti-Americanism is far more of a visceral feeling—a latent paranoia, perhaps—than an élite-driven pattern of response, as Granatstein claims.
Despite its flaws, readers, even those who harbour a certain amount of anti-Americanism themselves, will find it difficult to disagree with Yankee Go Home?"s conclusion: "With all its hatred, bias, and deliberately contrived fearmongering, anti-Americanism was once the Canadian way of being different. Now it has faded away, and good riddance to it" (286). It is unfortunate, however, that a book which concerns itself largely with debunking myths and refuting stereotypes then finds it necessary to appeal to the Canadian "hoser" image in citing "our common love of hockey," among other similar national virtues, as the glue which proposes to hold together a divergent nation; readers who assume that there must be more to being Canadian (or who simply do not like hockey) will find themselves disappointed by Granatstein's apparent uncertainty on the point (286). Reading Yankee Go Home? is, in the end, a rather depressing exercise, as one gets the sense that if all that is truly distinct about present-day Canadians are their "ehs" and "aboos," as Granatstein seems to believe, perhaps they should simply annex themselves to the United States and be done with it.