

Constructing a Canadian Child's Identity with the Group of Seven

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Résumé: Les auteurs proposent une analyse comparative de deux éditions d'un abécédaire célèbre, l'une publiée en 1931 et l'autre en 1990. Ils examinent la relation entre le texte et les illustrations, inspirées en grande partie des oeuvres picturales du Groupe des Sept, tout en soulignant, indirectement, les modifications qu'a subi la notion d'identité nationale au cours des quelque soixante ans qui séparent les deux versions.

Summary: This paper examines two editions of a famous ABC book, one published in 1931, the other in 1990. By comparing and contrasting the two accompanying texts (the illustrations in the two editions, drawing their inspiration from some of the works of Group of Seven painters, are the same), the paper draws some conclusions about the inter-relatedness of text and picture in each case, and incidentally makes some observations concerning changing notions of national identity over the 60 year period.

ABC books through their extensive history have always been about more than just teaching the alphabet to beginning readers. Similarly, Canadian ABC books in establishing their separate identity from their British and American counterparts in the early part of the twentieth century did much, if a bit more subtly, to indoctrinate their readers into their culture. An excellent basis for examining the evolving criteria for constructing a beginning reader versed in Canadian culture is provided by two editions of an alphabet book published 60 years apart. In 1931 artist Thoreau MacDonald (1901-1989) collaborated with academic and poet Robert K. Gordon (1887-1973) to produce *A Canadian Child's ABC*. In 1990, MacDonald's illustrations, now with verses by Lyn Cook, pseudonym for Evelyn Margaret Waddell, were published as *A Canadian ABC*.

We want to consider the two editions of this ABC from three perspec-

tives: first, for interpretations of the qualities deemed appropriate to construct a Canadian identity for young readers; second, to relate MacDonald's drawings to contemporary Canadian painting in 1931; and, last, to discuss the relationship between the texts and illustrations in what the cover blurb announces as this "uniquely Canadian celebration of the alphabet." In each case, both drawings and texts evince the usual markers for the construction of a national identity, geography, history (both events and persons), and language.

There are two principal links that connect the MacDonald/Gordon text to the Group of Seven and its paintings: the one is fortuitous and contingent, the other is deliberate and aesthetic. First, Thoreau MacDonald was the son of a founding member of the Group of Seven, J.E.H. MacDonald. The elder MacDonald, British-born, was nevertheless perceived to be a Canadian nationalist (Harper 271), and sought "an art expression which should embody the moods and character and spirit of the country" (Harper 270-71). Even without any wider influence, it seems unlikely that the younger MacDonald would not be affected by his father's activities. But, in fact, father and son worked together on a number of projects including those on St. Anne's church (Hill 124), on the Concourse Building (Hill 242), and on the Claridge Apartments (Hill 243), all in Toronto. And in *The Pine Tree Madonna* (1926), Thoreau MacDonald realized "his father's wish to Canadianize religious themes" (Hill 329). Second, it was customary for the Group of Seven to invite other artists to participate in their exhibitions. The younger MacDonald, by the 1920s a well-known Canadian book designer and "distinguished black-and-white illustrator" (Reid 178), participated in three of the Group's exhibitions by showing paintings (1926, 1928, 1930); in 1925, he displayed drawings and woodcuts at the entrance to the Group show, and in 1926, designed their catalogue covers for the Toronto show and another in Montreal (Hill 179). Third, the Group's paintings, such as Lawren Harris's *North Shore, Lake Superior* (1926), Fred Varley's *Stormy Weather, Georgian Bay* (1921), and A.Y. Jackson's *Night, Pine Island* (1924), demonstrate the Group's favoured Northern landscapes with their wind-swept trees, large rocks and white-capped water, all the elements that typify Group paintings. Furthermore, as Housser points out (151) "... in [both] treatment and technique, the Northern Ontario canvasses of the Group of Seven were dictated by the country itself." Important in the Group's appeal to Canadian nationalism was the idea, as Mellon notes, that "the northern landscape mirrored the national character" (110). "Their nationality is unmistakable," notes Housser. "It would seem to be a fact that in a new country like ours, which is practically unexplored artistically, courageous experiment is not only legitimate, but vital to the development of a living Canadian art" (114). It must also be remembered that the Group was based in Toronto, so almost every other Canadian location was "north." Finally, as a critical example of his own nationalistic bent,

Thoreau MacDonald was the author of a pamphlet, *The Group of Seven*, in which he notes that the Group of Seven “helped awake[n] countless Canadians to the grandeur and beauty of their country ...” (13). Thoreau MacDonald’s propinquity in activities and artistic and nationalist ideals to the Group is seemingly beyond question.

Second, as another deliberately aesthetic expression of his ties to the Group, in 1931 Thoreau MacDonald teamed with Robert K. Gordon, an academic and minor poet, to create *A Canadian Child’s ABC*. The drawings, echoing the compositions and subject matter of the Group of Seven, probably at that time at the apex of its fame, depict scenes of Canadian history, geography and people. In his drawings for *A Canadian Child’s ABC*, MacDonald aimed to have a broad range of geographical locations represented in accordance with Gordon’s initial verse, “Canada Two thousand miles of forest, A thousand miles of plain, A thousand miles of mountains, And then the sea again.” In particular, the craggy wind-blown pine trees, rocky shorelines and bold linear forms of these drawings reflect the Group’s ideas about art and nationalism.

In 1990, this ABC book was reissued by Penumbra Press under the title *A Canadian ABC*, retaining MacDonald’s small black and white 9 x 6 cm drawings on 14 x 18.5 cm pages, but with new text by Lyn Cook. The stark black and white drawings are exactly the same in both editions and are organized into a rectangular format with an alphabet letter incorporated as one of the corners of the narrow frame. Each drawing, appearing separately on the upper third of each right hand page, is a separate work of art signed



Illustration by Thoreau MacDonald
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"TM." Each is stark and bold with an economic use of detail. Many of the objects appear in silhouette. One of MacDonald's concerns is the lighting of his scenes when he indicates the sky with a series of parallel horizontal lines formed into a curve, which allows it to be interpreted as sun, moon, or sky, or just the border as in the entries for "E," "F," "G," "M," and "O." In other scenes, the light streams down from the clouds as a series of thin parallel lines arranged on a diagonal, a lighting device particularly favoured by another Group of Seven painter, Lawren Harris, and used here by MacDonald in the entries for "J" Jesuit and "L" lakes. Harris's painting *North Shore, Lake Superior* (1926) displays the diagonal lighting and the simplified forms characteristic of his attempts at abstracting the idea of North.

The illustrations for the letters "J," "W," and "Y" encourage the association with the Group of Seven with their large rocks, bent trees and expanses of water; however, these drawings have figures. The sky in "J" suggests a Group-echoing storm, whereas "Y" is unusual for including both a man panning for gold and a bear, which is not typical of Group paintings. On the other hand, this latter drawing does recall a composition by J.E.H. MacDonald, *The Elements* (1916), where two men enjoy a campfire on the rocks. Another J.E.H. MacDonald painting, *Rain in the Mountains* (1924), simplifies and abstracts the shapes of the mountains, not unlike what "TM" does in the illustration for "K" Kicking Horse [Pass]. As these examples demonstrate, it is impossible to look at Thoreau MacDonald's drawings in each ABC book without recalling the Group of Seven generally, and the work of some of the members of the Group specifically.

There are variations of execution in the ABC books from one illustration to another, such as in the clouds in the sky or the amount of depth in the scenes, which suggests that the pictures were produced over a period of time rather than all at once. Different entirely are the pictures for "U" and "X," both of which are simplified maps in bold black line. "U" is labelled simply "Terra Incognita" and stands for "unexplored." There are no place names, whereas "X marks the spot where Jacques Cartier landed," and includes such names as Gulf of St. Lawrence, Cape Gaspé, Chaleur Bay, Quebec, and Anticosti, presumably in an effort to focus the reader's attention on the lower St. Lawrence River locations. The unity between text and pictures in the 1931 edition suggests that Gordon and MacDonald must have worked closely together. Similar maps, also designed by Thoreau MacDonald, form the endpapers of F. B. Housser's 1926 book, *A Canadian Art Movement: The Story of the Group of Seven*, the first major publication on the Group of Seven.

Lyn Cook's new text for the 1990 edition of the ABC consists of "a simple quatrain" for each alphabet letter, and these seem to be more interested in tumpty-tum rhyming than in imparting information about, and prompting recognition of, familiar things and places in Canada. Significant first of all, perhaps, is the change in title which eliminates the word "child."

Consonant with this change, the back cover proclaims that “readers of all ages are invited to join us in this uniquely Canadian celebration of the alphabet.” This new text is undoubtedly more politically sensitive to the realities of late 20th century Canadian society than is the original, particularly in the rhymes for “I Indians”:

They are still here, but their fierce pride,
And wild free life have passed away,
Another race has thrust aside,
The children of a bygone day.

In contrast, Cook writes:

Indian guarding his tipi
Remembers his long history,
Lives with Nature, knows its way,
Shares with all who come to stay.

The same kind of distinction is to be seen in the rhyme for the Jesuits. Gordon wrote:

To light dark Indian souls they came,
And suffered for their dear faith's sake,
They passed unflinching to the flame,
They stood unconquered at the stake.

Cook's verse emphasizes the heroism of the priests in confronting a challenging environment.

Jesuit Fathers, cross in hand,
Face hardship in a new-found land.
With fear on earth and storms above,
They speak of brotherhood and love.

The new “imaginative writing” for young and old readers of the updated version has succeeded in minimizing, or eliminating, comments or references that would likely be considered offensive in the hypersensitive socio-political climate of the late 20th century. But the new text has also, perhaps unwittingly, altered the relationship between text and pictures.

Gordon's original text is filled with references to specific Canadian place names, identifiable historical figures, and historic events to present a nationalist book for its young readers, an approach of considerable significance in the context of “the strengthened ... national identity of many Canadians” in the post World War I years (Hill 75). Cook's updated text has

muffled, or even eliminated, a number of these references, and in so doing she has distanced text and pictures. A few examples will illustrate.

In Gordon's 1931 text, "Rivers" provides a verse for "R" and the encyclopedic list includes the Fraser, Red, Saskatchewan, Tobique, Saguenay, St. John, Peace, MacKenzie, Montreal and St. Lawrence. In Cook's updated version all specific names of rivers have been eliminated, and the focus on the rivers has shifted to the "brave explorers, mighty men." Second, "Vancouver" is the title for "V," showing a large passenger vessel, and the original rhyme says that the ship is "sailing to ports in far Cathay." In contrast, in Cook's version, the specific place names have been eliminated and 'V' in her text becomes "Vessels." All reference to the ships' possible destination is omitted. Third, B's beaver is just a beaver in Cook's quatrain, whereas Gordon indicates it was on Canadian stamps ("Upon our stamps he used to stand"). Finally, for explorers and rivers, Gordon lists names, but Cook's verses simply use generic terms. This move from the specific to the generic of explicit Canadian content in the text suggests that the Canadian flavour of this ABC is limited to the illustrations.

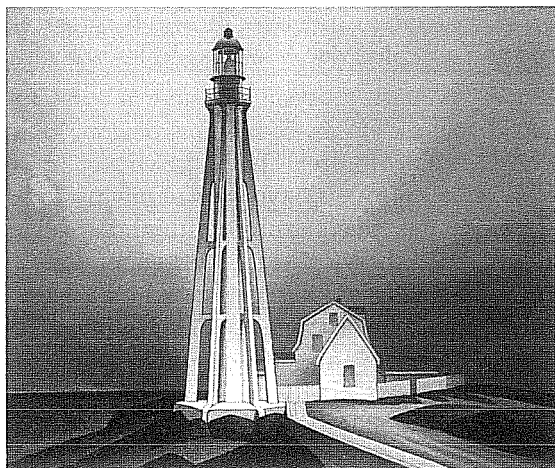
Occasionally, Cook's simplified, more generalized, text makes confusing what in Gordon is clear. Gordon's verses often provide historical vignettes about Canada's past. He provides eight lines of concentrated history in his account of Wolfe and Montcalm and the Battle of the Plains of Abraham in 1759:

With muffled oars upstream they crept,
Wolfe and his men, on that dark night,
They clambered up the narrow path,
And morning found them on the height.
And New France fell and Montcalm died,
And what France lost old England won,
But Wolfe, thrice wounded, only lived,
To hear with dying ears: "They run."

In contrast, Cook's elliptical approach must leave naive and history-challenged readers baffled:

Wolfe, by early morning light,
Readies now to scale the height,
To fight for king with courage true,
Montcalm, a general, dauntless too.

The text may be "politically correct" for a late 20th century sensibility but the elision from the victor of the historic battle to the vanquished, or more correctly, from the one combatant to the other, and with no indication of the outcome of the battle, would mystify all but students of Canadian history.



Lighthouse, Father Point, by Lawren Harris, is reproduced here courtesy of The National Gallery of Canada

There is also a much less personalized aspect to Cook's new text since she uses just over half the number of inclusive pronoun references, such as "we" and "our," used by Gordon in his original text.

Unfortunate, too, is Cook's apparent misinterpretation of MacDonald's illustration of the Father Point lighthouse. Built in 1910, the lighthouse near Rimouski, Quebec was the point at which pilots were picked up by ships heading up the St. Lawrence to Quebec City and Montreal. The original text notes: "There you pick up the pilot." This lighthouse's appearance was highly unusual in that it had large buttress legs which raised the light portion well off the ground. It would have been a familiar sight to shipboard passengers, and was widely known in any case to most Canadians since it was the subject of a well-publicized painting by Lawren Harris in 1930. As Harris worked, he eliminated details of the setting and tower, simplified shapes, exaggerated the height of the structure and reduced the number of colours. Thus, Father Point is still recognizable, but straightforward and direct in its presentation. In the completed painting, the lighthouse is surrounded by an aura of soft light, not unlike a halo, which is in keeping with Harris's association of the abstract and the spiritual.

MacDonald's illustration of Father Point adopts Harris's basic composition, but introduces further changes such as lowering the height and rounding the top of the lighthouse. The concrete flying buttresses are still emphasized. Further, MacDonald would have expected people to recognize the lighthouse and its source in Harris's work; Harris's painting, *Lighthouse, Father Point* was shown in the 1930 Group of Seven exhibition. That



Illustration by Thoreau MacDonald
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MacDonald included it here also indicates how up-to-date he was with his art references. Father Point also maintains the geographical variety found in *A Canadian Child's ABC*. Unlike Harris's stillness, MacDonald added a ship streaming smoke on the horizon and a large circular area of light is suggested by the curving shape in the upper corner of the now horizontal composition. This is a stylistic device characteristic of many MacDonald illustrations, but which Cook, in her updated text, sees as the light cast from the lighthouse: "Far shines the light" and "bright shines the moon ... to light all oceans...." The misreading of MacDonald's light device suggests that Cook did not pay close attention to what MacDonald was doing with a favourite stylistic device since he used the same technique for the illustration for "Explorers," which is not a moonlit scene. Not only has Cook removed a specific place name, she also seems to associate lighthouses only with ocean shores.

These examples clearly suggest the distance between Cook's new text and MacDonald's 1931 illustrations. In some cases it may be thought that such distancing is entirely appropriate in the context of today's socio-political sensitivities. In others, it is unfortunate that text and pictures are no longer as closely integrated as they once were. And in that context it may be said that *A Canadian ABC* is much less oriented toward the older notions of nationalism that dominate *A Canadian Child's ABC*. Perhaps this is an indication that the drawings, while they have historic and aesthetic appeal, are indeed too dated for this reissue. Yet the publisher was obviously impelled by the continuing popularity of the Group of Seven and their reputation for being truly Canadian.

We have discussed *A Canadian ABC* in some detail since its position as a reissued text makes it a unique case study in the history of illustrated Canadian ABC books. Reissuing MacDonald's drawings was, we believe, a deliberate effort to recall the Group of Seven and its association with Canadian nationalism. In examining it, one has the chance not only to examine the degree of integration of illustrations and text, but also to examine a different combination of illustration and text as a means of comparison and contrast. Further, of course, the differences between the first edition and the reissue provide an excellent example of how the illustrated ABC book can serve as an index to some of the changing values in a society.

Note

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