

TAPTOO!! : Telling Tales and Making it Up in Canada

“Collective memory simplifies; sees events from a single, committed perspective; is impatient with ambiguities of any kind; reduces events to mythic archetypes.”

Peter Novick, The Holocaust in American Life

“In reification by the poet or the historian, the narration of history has achieved permanence and persistence....No philosophy, no analysis, no aphorism, be it ever so profound, can compare in intensity and richness of meaning with a properly related story.”

Hannah Arendt, Men in Dark Times

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Taptoo!!, the latest operatic collaboration between John Beckwith and James Reaney, combines both historical and imaginary material, as their work usually does. Beckwith's score echoes with familiar tunes from the past- "Over the Hills and Far Away" and "Marching Down to Old to Quebec", for example, - refashioned with a contemporary flavour. Reaney's libretto recounts familiar historical incidents from the Battle of Fallen Timbers to the founding of York, adds some fictitious ones, and re-creates a past that evokes contemporary meaning. The result is a marvellous entertainment as an opera should be. It is also an exploration of the meaning of the Canadian past not as "history" but rather as "collective memory."

The past, myth, memory and the history of Canada – or at least English Canada or maybe just Ontario –are matters that have preoccupied James Reaney for a long time. They appear and re-appear in almost all of his writing. His work, like that of W.B. Yeats, a poet he greatly admires, "involved mastering the past through visionary narration, and in the process shaping the present and future consciousness of the 'nation' – whoever they were."ⁱ Those are the words of Yeats' biographer, R.F. Foster. If "Ireland" was changed to "Canada," the title of Foster's recent book might easily be applied to Reaney's collected works: Telling Tales and Making it Up in Ontario. When Reaney tells his tales and makes up some new ones, what he wants to conjure up, I think, is a myth or a collective memory that explains the past, admonishes the present and offers guidance to the future.

Without being too ponderous, I hope, I want to begin by saying something about my understanding of these concepts: the past, myth, memory, and history. Historians often claim—explicitly or otherwise – a monopoly on the past and its meaning; they, after all, have the skills required to transform the past into “history.” In reality historians have never had a monopoly over the past, though they may have a monopoly over “history,” for the two are not the same thing. (One of my students, Molly Ungar, created an artwork composed of a chaotic collage of words. She entitled it “the Past is Not History.” It hangs in the common room at the York history department and, I hope, teaches our students the first essential lesson they need to learn.) The past is, and always has been, available to almost everyone interested in it, but especially to artists and writers of fictional narratives. They, like historians, reconstruct and re-imagine the past, but their goal is rarely the same as the goal of historians, nor are the rules of their game the historian’s rules. Where historians claim to write “history” – a factually accurate though interpreted account of the past, the writer, painter or musician seeks to describe and nurture a “collective memory”, a myth which expresses a truth even if, as the stage directions to Taptoo!! note, “some characters are historical, others imaginary.”ⁱⁱ

Though “history” and “collective memory” are not always completely distinct in either historical writing or narrative fiction, it is important to understand that they are not the same and are even contradictory. For the historian the “past is a foreign country”; his or her intent is to re-construct it and make it understandable to the present while preserving its difference – its foreignness. For the explorers of collective memory, the past provides an arsenal of stories, examples, and admonitions for the present – myths relevant to the present. “...a significant collective memory,” Peter Novick argues, in his

study of The Holocaust in American Life, “is understood to express some eternal truth about the group – usually tragic. A memory, once established, comes to define that eternal truth, and, along with it, an eternal identity, for members of that group.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Now let me be very clear: I am not claiming that history is “truth”, and myth “fiction”. They are simply different kinds of knowledge. History, as I have already said, is the reconstruction of the past by the selection and interpretation of empirical evidence. Myth “is a narrative or group of narratives which recount the activities of a culture’s gods and heroes.”^{iv}

What has all of this got to do with the boisterous story told in Taptoo!! ? First, the history. Reaney has focussed his script on what many would call the central event in the English Canadian version – the nationalist version - of our history: the American Revolution, the coming of the Loyalists, and the establishment of a precarious Upper Canada. (For French Canadians, of course, the central event is the Conquest of 1759 and the coming of the British. Hence the claim sometimes made that Canada is founded on the determination of two groups of “losers” to survive.) The tale of Loyalists is a familiar one, but in this version it is appealingly told through the lives of one particular family, the Harples. The cast of characters –Governor and Lady Simcoe, the Jarvises, General “Mad Anthony” Wayne, Francois Baby now known as Francis Baby- are joined by several even more interesting fictional ones, who, I will suggest shortly, tell the essential story. As one would expect in a tale told by James Reaney, there is a good deal of wit and humour, and mischief. The reduction of the famous battle of Fallen Timbers in August 1794, when Wayne defeated the Maumee Indians, to a Buttonwood tree falling on his tent was especially delicious. Perhaps this is the “tree of liberty.” Similarly amusing, I thought,

was the idea that the distinction between the members of the Upper House (Tories) and the Lower House (Reformers) turned not on political principle but on eating at the same table as the servants – or not! And then there is the send-up of Mrs. Simcoe.

Beyond these witty re-enactments of early nineteenth-century North American history, there is a more serious, even darker, element injected into the narrative that really intrigues me. This is the matter of the naming or rather the renaming of places. Though not many historians of Canada have noted it – Colin Coates' study entitled The Metamorphoses of Landscape and Community in Early Quebec is perhaps the only one – naming and renaming is a fundamental act of possession; Coates calls it “the first act of appropriating” a territory. That claim is confirmed in Australia by Paul Carter's The Road to Botany Bay and by Meron Benvenisti in Sacred Landscape, a brilliant and depressing study of the transformation of Palestine into Israel.^v In a couple of places – Act II, scene 4 called “Loyal she began...” and again in scene 6- Simcoe proclaims that existing native and French names will be replaced by good British ones: “Wawanosh” to “Kent County”, “Côtes de Misère” to “Essex County”, the river “Akunessippi”, which the French had already renamed “La Tranche”, to the “Thames.” And finally, to cap it off in an unmistakable act of semiological imperialism, “Lac des Rosiers” is rechristened “Lake Simcoe.”^{vi} Perhaps I misconstrue or exaggerate Reaney's intent, though he had earlier committed himself through Seth to the proposition that “it *is* their land,”^{vii} meaning the Native peoples'. But intended or not –and I think Reaney rarely does anything unintentionally – these naming and renaming scenes provide a remarkable insight into one of the often ignored meanings of “Loyal she began...” If Loyalism is the founding myth of English Canadian nationalism, it leaves out some significant people. In 1984

when Ontario celebrated its supposed bicentennial by marking the arrival of the Loyalists, both Franco-Ontarians and Native people protested that they had been here long before the Loyalists.^{viii}

But let me turn from history to myth. The key to what's going on here is obviously found in the roles of the lovers, Seth and Atahentsic, the Quaker and the native princess. Seth is not just any name, though it was a common enough one among New England Protestants. It was, as my Biblically informed wife pointed out, the name of the third son of Adam and Eve, the first two being Cain and Abel. (Ebenezer and Seth sometimes act like these warring brothers, but I think this is not intended.) This, then, casts Jesse and Mrs. Harples as Adam and Eve. Like their Old Testament counterparts, the Harples were driven from the republican Paradise threatened by the viper of mob rule.

To the Old Testament myth of creation, Atahentsic adds a second, equally potent myth. In the Iroquois Book of Genesis, Atahentsic, or Sky Woman, is expelled from Skyworld: she falls through a hole, plummeting to the primal sea below. Miraculously she is saved by the water animals who build her an island of mud on the back of a turtle. There are many versions of this creation story – two dozen at least – and it was not confined to the Iroquoian-speaking people. In Taptoo!! Atahentsic's father, named Chief Turtle to make the point unmistakably, is an Algonquian-speaking Maumee of the Ottawa nation, some of whom settled on Walpole Island after Fallen Timbers.^{ix} On her Island, Atahentsic is impregnated either by the wind –an immaculate conception, I suppose - or by one of the animals. She gives birth to twins and, though they go by various names, they represent good, or creation, and evil, or destruction. Here again Seth and Ebenezer in their constant conflict might be these young men. In most Iroquoian

versions, good finally triumphs over evil but only after a titanic struggle of rock-throwing and tree-uprooting that creates mountains and rivers and the other features of the natural landscape. In other versions, the outcome is more ambiguous, for these myths are what the anthropologist William Fenton calls “composite cultural pieces”, a term that might be applied to the Reaney-Beckwith opera.^x In the libretto, the final outcome of the Seth-Ebenezer (Canada-U.S.A) struggle is left to our imaginations: “What can we do?”^{xi} Or to the history of the War of 1812, whose conclusion was ambiguous. The actual production ends on a more positive visual note – an image of the CN Tower reaching for the sky. If that’s positive.

But what I want to emphasize is that in Taptoo!! a new creation myth is recounted. The marriage of Seth, son of Adam and Eve, and Atahentsic, perhaps the wife of Sky Chief (owner of the “Tree of Light”), combined “the sacred tortoise of my father’s tribe” and “the cross of my husband’s faith”^{xii} For marrying a native woman, Seth is kicked and beaten by Wayne’s soldier, egged on by Ebenezer/Cain/evil brother. Where will the newly-weds find sanctuary? “Where shall we go now?” they ask. “Not to the south where our enemies are. \ Wilderness, birds in flight, \ Shadows, earth, air\ Tell us where? \ To the North! To the North!” Here we are surely being presented with another feature of the founding or creation myth for Canada, or at least, Upper Canada: the true north, strong and free!^{xiii}

The coming of the Loyalists, the establishment of Upper Canada, the choice of Toronto as the new capital: these well-known events rest on something more than the historian’s required documentary evidence. They rest on a founding myth that combines Loyalism and the rejection of the new, aggressive Republic; the promise of the north and,

above all, a creation that combines the Biblical account with the Iroquoian myth of Atahentsic and the world on the turtle's back. This creation myth explains the past, but also bears a message for the future of an "endangered baby colony."^{xiv} That relevant message is expressed in Simcoe's exhortation that Seth, and the audience, "will always remember": "Draw your swords, Rangers, the rebels are coming."^{xv} The past, myth, memory and history, all play a part as the opera's lyrics conjure up a collective memory for English-Canadians. This operatic tour-de-force dramatically reminds us, as R.F. Foster wrote of Ireland, that "memory, as the mother of the muses, is creatively selective."^{xvi}

Both poetry and history, then, seek to bring order to the untidy past – to create an agreed upon narrative. And that, Hannah Arendt has told us, is the way it should be. She writes: "Insofar as any 'mastering' of the past is possible, it consists in relating what has happened; but such narration, too, which shapes history, solves no problems and assuages no suffering; it does not master anything once and for all. Rather, as long as the meaning of the events remains alive... 'mastering the past' can take the form of ever-recurrent narration. The poet in a very general sense and the historian in a very special sense have the task of setting this process of narration in motion and of involving us in it."^{xvii} That, I think, is what James Reaney, the poet-historian –with essential help from the musician, John Beckwith – has achieved in Taptoo!! The narration of this often-told tale has again been set in motion and we have become involved in it.

It is said that an anthropologist, or more likely a sceptical historian, on first hearing the story of the world on the turtle's back, declared that while the tale was a good

one he wondered what was under the turtle. “It’s turtles all the way down,” the prophet replied.

That’s Taptoo!! – turtles all the way down.

ⁱⁱ James Reaney and John Beckwith, Taptoo!! (1993) ,iv

ⁱⁱⁱPeter Novick, The Holocaust in American Life (Boston and New York 1999) 4; see also Yael Zerubavel Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of the Israeli National Tradition (Chicago and London 1995).

^{iv} J.B.V. “Myth” in Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan, eds., The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics (Princeton 1993), 806; See also Paul Veyne, Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination (Chicago and London 1988) “Docudrama”, as exemplified by the CBC’s recent “Trudeau”, claims that there is a third way of organizing the past that *combines* history and fiction. But oil and water don’t mix. While fiction can incorporate history as in Taptoo!! or Margaret Atwood’s Alias Grace, history cannot incorporate fiction and remain history. “Docudrama” is neither history nor fiction, it is merely entrainment.

^v Colin M. Coates, The Metamorphoses of Landscape and Community in Early Quebec (Montreal and Kingston 2000); Paul Carter, The Road to Botany Bay (New York 1988); Meron Benvenisti, Sacred Landscape The Buried History of the Holy Land since 1948 (Berkeley and London 2000)

^{vi} Taptoo!!, 32, 43

^{vii} ibid., 28

^{viii} Norman Knowles, Inventing the Loyalists: the Ontario Loyalist Tradition and the Invention of Usable Pasts (Toronto 1997) 171

^{ix} Bruce Trigger, ed., Handbook of the North American Indian Northeast, 15, (Washington 1978), 777

^x William N. Fenton, “ “This Island, the World on the Back of the Turtle,” Journal of American Folklore, 75, 1962, 288

^{xi} Taptoo!! , 46

^{xii} Taptoo!! , 34

^{xiii}Taptoo!! 29. On the persistence of this myth and its problems see Carl Berger, “the true north strong and

free” in Peter Russell, ed., Nationalism in Canada, (Toronto 1966) 3-20 and Janice Cavell, “The Second Frontier; the North in English-Canadian Historical Writing,” Canadian Historical Review, 83,3, September 2002, 364-89

^{xiv} Taptoo!!, 46

^{xv} Taptoo!!, 44

^{xvi} Foster, *ibid.*, 233

^{xvii} Hannah Arendt, Men in Dark Times (New York 1968), 21