

## THE CANADIAN CASE

This article is a review of the book *National Consciousness and the Curriculum: The Canadian Case*, edited by Geoffrey Milburn and John Herbert. The first half is composed by Milburn and Herbert, who summarize the various sections of the book and highlight its organization – a series of discussions between various academics within the field of curriculum studies. The second half is MacIver’s review.

“Two of the most contentious issues in Canada in recent years,” Milburn and Herbert begin, “have been the nature of the Canadian identity on the one hand, and the role of the nation’s schools in fostering that identity on the other.”<sup>1</sup> They characterize *National Consciousness and the Curriculum: The Canadian Case* as “an introductory reader that may interest members of the general public who are concerned about the Canadian identity in our schools.”<sup>2</sup> It may also appeal, they continue, to “Teachers of Canadian Studies [who] may use it in seminars or discussion groups for students in Canadian history, literature, art, and public affairs.”<sup>3</sup> Because the collection addresses “the nature of federalism, treatment of national arts in schools, and the process of curriculum development,” it “may be helpful also in intercultural programs.”<sup>4</sup>

MacIver allows that “the idea of bringing together commentators of such widely diverse backgrounds promises much,” but he judges that “the promise is only partially fulfilled,” as not only are there “weak” chapters; indeed, there are a “few” that “would have been better omitted,” as they “add nothing to the question of either Canadian consciousness or the development of a significant curriculum.”<sup>5</sup> Because “some” chapters present “perspectives on Canada and ‘Canadianism’ ... lucidly and well,” the volume may prove “useful to teachers and curriculum supervisors.”<sup>6</sup>

The final section, MacIver continues, “where Milburn and Herbert review the collection, we are left with a good summary of what the contemporary Canadian intelligentsia think about Canadian consciousness and curriculum,” but there is no answer to the “puzzling question of what the classroom teacher can do with these ideas.”<sup>7</sup> That patronizing comment converts to cynicism (or it is contempt) when MacIver characterizes the contributors to the volume as “ivory-towered” and teachers as lacking courage or conviction, as MacIver predicts teachers will ignore the collection and “revert to and regular classroom teaching.”<sup>8</sup>

---



---

### COMMENTARY

MacIver’s criticism that the collection is uneven is predictable – edited volumes typically have strong and weak chapters, despite the editors’ best efforts – but his

contempt for intellectuals (the “ivory-tower” aspersion) and cynicism concerning teachers (that they are incapable of figuring out what to do with the “ideas” in the collection) are shocking today. Then, evidently not so much. The readiness to generalize about teachers without empirical evidence shows up still, as articles briefed on occasion indicate.

I juxtapose the Milburn-Herbert essay in this 1974 collection with one written in 2001 by Sumara-Davis-Laidlaw to underscore how “the Canadian case” has changed (and stayed the same) over the almost thirty years separating the publication of each.<sup>9</sup> No doubt we will return to issues of Canadian identity as this project proceeds.

## REFERENCES

- MacIver, Don. 1976. Reviewed work(s): *National Consciousness and the Curriculum: The Canadian Case* by Geoffrey Milburn and John Herbert. *Canadian Journal of Education* 1 (2), 75-78.
- Milburn, Geoffrey and Herbert, John. Eds. 1974. *Consciousness and the Curriculum: The Canadian Case*. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Department of Curriculum.
- Pinar, William. 2015. *Educational Experience as Lived*. New York: Routledge.
- Westbrook, Robert. 1991. *John Dewey and American Philosophy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

## ENDNOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> In MacIver 1976, 75. I am reminded of John Dewey’s characterization of classrooms as laboratories for democracy, implying that schools could indeed shape a nation’s identity. It was an idea he altered not ten years after formulating it. “By the eve of World War I,” Westbrook (1991, 192) reports, “Dewey was more fully aware that the democratic reconstruction of American society he envisioned could not take place simply by a revolution in the classroom, that, indeed, the revolution in the classroom could not take place until the society’s adults had been won over to radical democracy.”

<sup>2</sup> In MacIver 1976, 76.

<sup>3</sup> In MacIver 1976, 76.

<sup>4</sup> In MacIver 1976, 76.

---

<sup>5</sup> MacIver 1976, 76.

<sup>6</sup> MacIver 1976, 76. This is a judgement he changes, as you'll see soon.

<sup>7</sup> MacIver 1976, 78. Why “the classroom teacher” – a puzzlingly monolithic-reductionistic concept – would want to be told what “to do with these ideas” escapes me.

<sup>8</sup> MacIver 1976, 78.

<sup>9</sup> Pinar 2015, 47.