
ROCKEFELLER, CARNEGIE AND CANADA: AMERICAN PHILANTHROPY AND THE ARTS AND LETTERS IN CANADA

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Gregory Klages, Joint Graduate Programme in Communication and Culture, York University (Toronto, Canada).

Liberalization in global trade over the last three decades has compelled a re-awakening of Canadian cultural nationalism. This nationalism points to the threat posed to domestic cultural production by the juggernaut to the immediate south, as well as the need to protect and nurture distinctly Canadian ideas and products. Recent research suggests, however, that Canada's culture has been built upon a close, often symbiotic relationship with the very forces nationalists decry as corrupting and dangerous. In *Rockefeller, Carnegie and Canada*, Jeffrey Brison explores how two of the largest US philanthropic foundations operated in Canada up to the 1960s. In particular, Brison exposes how these corporations provided critical support for the development of research in the arts, humanities and social sciences in Canada.

Concentrating on how individuals and organizations sought US-based financial support for creative and academic work in Canada between the 1920s and 1960s, Brison points to the significant involvement of the Carnegie and Rockefeller foundations in shaping major events in the Canadian transition from private patronage to state predominance in the creative and academic sectors. He draws attention to the role of the foundations in the creation of hospitals, libraries, training programs, and support for academic publishing, as well as bodies including the Federation of Canadian Artists, and Canada's Social Science and Humanities Research Councils. He also notes how even some of the most outspoken advocates of Canadian autonomy from US influence, such as Donald Creighton, Harold Innis and Vincent Massey worked within rather than against the network of North American organizations dependent on the generosity of the Carnegie and Rockefeller foundations.

As much as Canadians will accept that their economy is built upon a close trading relationship with the United States, few like to believe their cultural development has such a common bond. The reality of the critical role played by US-based funding for cultural and educational development in Canadian society has faded into the background of history against the glare of more recent calls to build and maintain better bulwarks against what is perceived as American cultural hegemony.

Challenging long-standing notions, Brison suggests the identification of Canadian initiatives for the support of the arts and letters as being grounded exclusively in British models is faulty. Given the impressive array of Canadian projects and scholars supported by US philanthropy between the First World War and the late 1950s, Brison suggests determining moments for 'national' culture, such as the 1941 Kingston Conference of Canadian Artists, the report of the Royal Commission for the Encouragement of the Arts, Letters and Sciences in 1951, and the creation of the Canada Council in 1957, need to be re-interpreted. Instead of identifying these key initiatives as simple efforts to protect Canadian initiatives against US pressure, he suggests close analysis reveals they all show strong influence from the Carnegie and Rockefeller foundations and, in fact, developed along lines deeply grounded in foundation precedents.

Brison joins a growing chorus of historians, such as Ian Angus, Phillip Massolin, Len Kuffert, Mark Kristmanson, and Kevin Dowler, seeking to ‘correct’ the record of how national cultural values in mid-twentieth-century Canada developed. In focusing his spotlight on US foundations, however, he contributes to studies by a much smaller constellation of researchers. Few, if any historians have looked at the involvement of US philanthropic foundations in Canadian culture and scholarship in any depth. This study constitutes an important body of information drawn from close analysis of correspondence between the foundations and Canadian scholars and advocates, sourced from traditionally overlooked resources such as the Carnegie and Rockefeller foundation archives. Unlike some efforts, Brison’s strategy allows him to challenge long-standing assertions with enough primary evidence to give his argument traction.

Rockefeller, Carnegie and Canada does suffer from some weaknesses. Maria Tippett, an historian long-associated with this field, described the text as “turgid.” Such a term seems harsh to apply to a first effort by a young academic. The book, however, does occasionally feel as if it is a doctoral dissertation-turned-monograph, particularly in the didactic introduction to each chapter, and the discussion of the overall significance of the study. Such a minor shortcoming can be easily forgiven, however,

A deeper problem can be located in Brison’s struggle to bring the reader ‘up to speed’ in a field that has been almost completely ignored in Canadian scholarship. After establishing the origins and basic values of the two philanthropic corporations, Brison is already a quarter of the way through his text. Most of his work is devoted to describing projects and explaining relationships that have gone heretofore unconsidered. Based on good scholarship, this narrative, however, does not seem to aggressively progress towards a clear destination.

A stronger theoretical framework might help focus the survey. References to Marx, Gramsci and Benedict Anderson are *de rigueur* for this sort of work, but are left behind too quickly to give any real sense of how they might have shaped the inquiry, and are never rejoined in the conclusion. Reference to network theory might also have played a useful explanatory function for clarifying how the foundations operated, particularly in terms of promulgating their values within another country.

Brison’s argument also seems in need of fortification. Clearly, as he observes, the values of the foundations were built into Canadian institutions and practices, if not always in content, certainly in form. The more interesting question, unfortunately left unaddressed, is what the significance of this isomorphism is for understanding how nationalists in Canadian arts and letters could overlook or rationalize the involvement of US philanthropic foundations in activities in this country. Considering Brison’s criticism of the dominant reading of the development of Canadian culture in relation to influences from the United States, is he trying to suggest the philanthropies were not compelled by some foreign, ‘American’ values? Or, is he suggesting that the nationalist Canadians who depended on this foreign support did not perceive the particular values inculcated by the philanthropies as distinctly ‘American’?

The strength of *Rockefeller, Carnegie and Canada* is that by establishing the place of American philanthropy in Canadian cultural and intellectual history, it effectively destabilises a central myth in Canadian cultural history, and offers an intriguing private-sector comparison to later Cold War cultural initiatives created by the US government to shape intellectual development in other countries. The multitude of ‘loose threads’ the study leaves behind speaks, in part, to the abundant potential this initial effort has exposed.