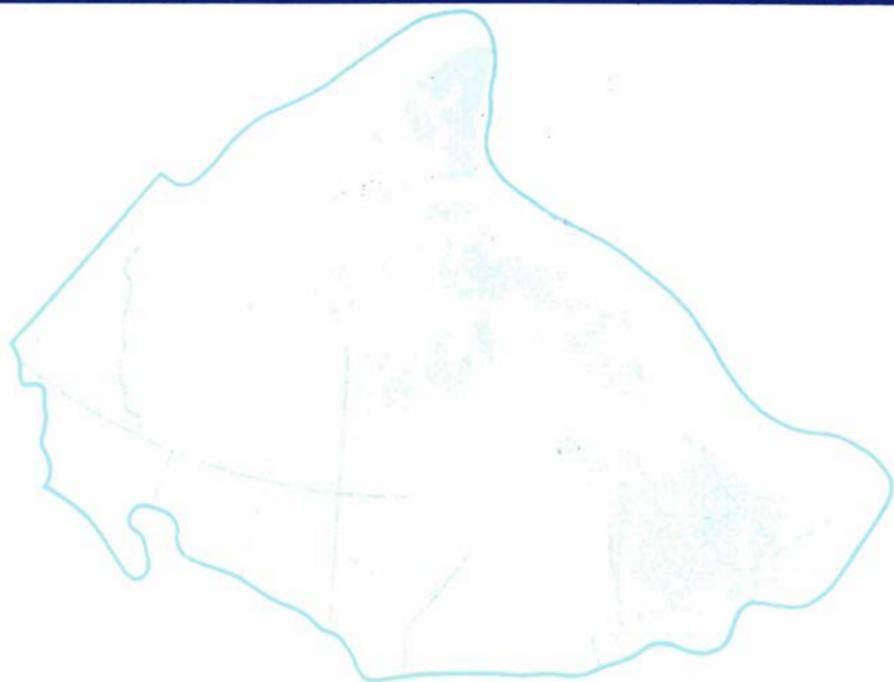


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Canadian Nordicity



**It's Your
North, Too**

1 Images of the North

Several types of documents relate to assorted over-all, or specific images of the North. Among them is the oral literature of the indigenous peoples, with a delightful and enigmatic body of stories and legends;² the writings of researchers, non-specialized, but widely disseminated; literature such as newspapers; and finally, results of specific objective tests. In spite of the need for the latter, we should not decry images of the North that have emerged from texts based on more traditional approaches. Indeed, these documents may exercise an enormous influence on the thoughts of the northern inhabitant. Thus, Voltaire, speaking to the French of France, referred to the miserable Canadian settler, squatting "in the snow between the bear and the beaver."[†] Present-day tests might still reveal a distant echo of that writer's opinion.³ The same thing happened around 1900; those who produced the overly enthusiastic bulletins on the Klondike were largely responsible for the paradoxical image of the gold-fields that became current. A critical and complete survey of all visions of the North would have to consider northern literature in all its forms, and that in itself would result in a major work. I shall touch on only a very small part of that encyclopedic total.

Among Whites, the popular imagination has rarely perceived the North as a whole; it has, rather, regarded only particular and very localized northern situations. The current perceptive totality would include a host of little sectoral tableaux relating, for example, to the Northwest Passage, a particular polar expedition, the Inuit, the RCMP, the cold, and to the Klondike. Moreover, many of these topics would be characterized by inadequate information. Ten centuries after the arrival of the Vikings in North America, we still have not been able to interpret the deceptive appellation of "Vinland." For several centuries, a persistent confusion has prevailed between Hudson Bay and "the frozen sea of the North." Cartier's expression, "the land God gave to Cain,"[†]

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still appeared to have its echo in the scientific literature in 1935.⁴ Captain J. Elzéar Bernier is considered to be an explorer, but in reality he mainly played a political role in territories that were already discovered. Biologist M. J. Dunbar has spoken about the reputation of Hudson Bay for infertility. This kind of reappraisal would be desirable for the great majority of particular northern situations. It is at the level of specific conditions, rather than at that of the total area, that we find true or erroneous images of the Canadian North. Nonetheless some overviews have been presented.⁵

From what may be established from an incomplete inventory of mirages about the North, two extreme opinions frequently emerge:⁶ an over-idealized vision and an excessively pessimistic vision. Whereas these two illusions have usually operated alternately, they have also undergone parallel development – and that has made them even more confused.

THE DOUBLE ILLUSION AMONG NON-INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

The majority of informative or interpretive documents have given rise to two types of conflicting and mutually regulating emotions: mirages and disappointments. Attractive mirages, particularly those fired with the pioneer spirit, are contrasted with disappointments, which have disabused, in particular, those seeking massive, quick profits. These two sentiments have not affected members of the various social classes proportionately; the executives have been, on the whole, more unconsolable over their blighted hopes, and the little man has been more intoxicated by the prospect of intense, if short-lived, illusions of good fortune. Because the misfortunes have become better known than the successes, this mechanism has nourished a generally negative perception of the North.

The list of northern adventures that did not give rise to further development, such as Martin Frobisher's gold rush to Baffin four centuries ago, would be a very long one. Much later, miners had been talking about the copper at Chibougamau for fifty years before they began to exploit it. Few of the Klondikers grew rich during the three months that they had judged *a priori* to be long enough to make a pile of gold nuggets. And how many fortunes have disappeared in ill-justified ventures of financing and prospecting?

We can see the same result in the realm of exploration. We remember more readily disasters, such as that of Franklin in the mid-nineteenth

century, than successful journeys such as that of Mackenzie in the late eighteenth. And, even in the latter case, the great river Mackenzie discovered did not lead to the Pacific as he had hoped. Polar toponymy reflects the difficulties and disappointments of a host of adventurers.

The North has certainly been the victim of myths based on indifference, if not of repulsion. Explorers and missionaries, who worked during periods that might be described as pretechnical, have left the idea of a harsh land and climate, a view that was not at all unfavourable to the success of their book sales and the gathering of alms. The anticipated harshness combined to accentuate the physical harshness. It is easy to concur with Vilhjalmur Stefansson's apt comment that in the North, "imaginary problems are more important than real problems."⁷† It was, in large measure, natural and historic conditions that created the heroism of the sailors, "men of iron in wooden ships."[†] In our generation, we might consider the reverse!

Settlement also produced an overwhelming amount of negative evidence, although northern settlement has been neither abundant nor always permanent. The great majority of centres in the Northwest Territories have less than 500 inhabitants; a similar situation prevails in both the Yukon and Nouveau-Québec. Even in the Near North, which is more fully integrated with the communications networks of the South, the population is very scanty. This sparseness would be even greater if the inhabitants had not learned to fulfill a great diversity of functions. In Abitibi (Quebec), most of the settlers who came to practise agriculture in the tradition of North American pioneering now earn their living by totally different means.

Further, human achievements have been difficult and limited. In a nation where yield and profit are the usual measure of things, it is not surprising that an acute feeling of repulsion and disinterest arises and is nourished.

Parallel to this, but working in the opposite direction, there are the prophets, men who are more optimistic than realistic. They have been touched by the magic of the North. They have come from every walk of life and, in their ardent promotions, they have turned their attention to every last little scrap of the immensity of northern Canada. To Curé Labelle, the North⁸ was to become the "main highway for French-Canadian nationalism."[†] To cite another case, a certain influential man of politics predicted thirty-one million inhabitants on the two shores of James Bay by the end of this century.⁹ Before preliminary operations began for harnessing the Quebec rivers that

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deboch into James Bay, there were not even 5,000 inhabitants in this area.

The enforced opening up of the North associated with the Second World War created a climate of enthusiasm regarding the North. In 1946 Maurice Duplessis, commenting on his own laws on mining development, stated that in Ungava "Providence had already gone three-quarters of the way" †; one only had to bend over to pick up the iron scattered on the surface.

After the re-discovery of oil at Prudhoe Bay in 1968, United States capitalists shipped to Alaska all the materials necessary for the imminent construction of pipelines; but several years passed before the first line was built. A similar euphoria presided over the organization of the conferences on *Mid-Canada Development* between 1968 and 1971; up until now, few concrete results have emerged from this project.

What must be clearly recognized is this duality between appeal and disappointment, between means to development and the natural propensity to avoid difficulties. These twin tendencies constantly recur: "There seem to be many visions of the North . . . The southern vision (the North is a hinterland to be exploited for the benefit of southern Canada) . . . The romanticized vision (wilderness must never be touched) . . . The pessimistic vision (which sees only the problems) and the developmental vision (with natural gas opportunities)." ¹⁰ The entire history of the North revolves around this confrontation, at the same time both clear and confused. Idealists are incessantly attempting to involve southerners in northern adventures; incessantly, people lacking the pioneer spirit, or disappointed investors, put the brake on northern projects. Apart from the war years, when the northern surge was unnatural, development has coincided with periods when mirages of feasibility dominated. Thus, at any given moment, concepts of good or bad exercise a profound impact on life, financial activity, mobility of the labour force, presence of political forces, and on awareness of certain problems. These mechanisms should not be surprising. Is a country not the fruit of the mind?

In the minds of the Whites, a comparable oscillation applies equally with respect to the Amerindians. As far as the Euro-Canadian is concerned, the twin images of the good Indian and the bad Indian have existed side by side. In 1972, responses to a test still gave the Eskimo the status of the "noble savage," with a pure ideology threatened by southern civilization. On the other hand, disagreeable prejudices are more common. The fact that Whites are surprised at the technical skill of

adults, the intelligence of children, the ease of childbearing on the part of the mothers, constitutes so many manifestations of the preconceived image of the indigenous people.¹¹ Others have noted that the "learning materials" of the Department of Education of the Northwest Territories had included numerous uncharitable, incorrect, or incomplete allusions to the indigenous peoples, who comprised 54% of the school population.

THERE ARE SO MANY NORTHS WITHIN THE NORTH

Although the input is imposing, it does not form a compact mass or an organized whole; it consists rather of a whole series of disparate and poorly connected interpretations. This divergence is initially apparent at the individual level. Jim Lotz distinguished among White northerners: "The Developers, the Maintainers, the Innovators, the Old Northern Whites, the Transients, the Outsiders, the outside Insiders."¹² Each perceives the North differently. In a community in the Eastern Arctic, a study on the perception of ethnic identity revealed three type-portraits of people: "the priest, the Anglican missionary's wife, and the trader." Moreover, it was found that behaviour and gestures were adjusted according to perception of things and individuals. Thus, by custom, only the Eskimo language was used when asking people to wipe their feet before coming in.¹³ Administrators coming from the towns of Southern Canada tend to have a distorted view of the North with regard to the environment in which northern residents live. This perceptive dissonance, this distortion, is very obvious particularly with regard to housing and education policies.

On the spatial level, the North is again perceived differently. The majority of inhabitants, even northerners, have great difficulty picturing the North in its geographic immensity; theirs is still a fragmented North. This Balkanization tendency is not at all surprising, given, on the other hand, the lack of one natural polar unity and, on the other hand, the lack of any old, strong, unified political structure. Thus the images, on the level of the perceptible North, those to which the individual can develop his own behaviour, have multiplied. There is not one single mental image of the North; a host of partial and often contradictory assessments are found. On the spatial level, they are over-lapping or discontinuous; on the chronological level, they display prolongations, adaptations, and even reversals of opinion.

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MENTALLY, A CANADA THAT IS ONLY SLIGHTLY NORTHERN

Despite the importance of the mental aspect in the definition of the North, and the polymorphic nature of that perception, the North has still not penetrated deeply into the comfortable society of southern Canada. Even while resident northerners are on the increase in absolute numbers, the small proportion they represent in the total population is growing slowly. This demographic situation has its equivalent on the level of thought and everyday life. Evidence of this is widespread. Only 7% of Canadian stamps carry a northern message and, even then, they often do so in a deceptive manner – for example, by amputating Canada's Far North. At Dorval Airport in Montreal, the large mural devoted to Canada seems to represent only southern Canada. In 1970, W.L. Morton recognized that “no scheme of Canadian historiography yet advanced is wholly satisfactory because none as yet takes account of the occurrence of the North.”¹⁴ The Canadian historian most intimate with northern archives is M. Zaslow, and his testimony is just as clear: “Canadians fail to recognize that they are essentially a northern people.”¹⁵ The same assertion has been expressed differently by F.K. Hare: “Canadians have not, as a nation, put the North anywhere near the centre of their mythology.”¹⁶ Henri Dorion concluded his comments on a text devoted to boundaries (including those of Labrador) by speaking of political ignorance, and by affirming that, “our territorial awareness is not very rigorous.”¹⁷ † To give another example, some Laval students, when asked to enumerate Canada's major problems, mentioned the North in only 9% of cases, and even then it was bracketed along with the cold climate.¹⁸ Finally, to mark the occasion of the Olympic Games in Montreal in 1976, Canada issued a \$5 coin displaying a map of the country: part of the High Arctic does not appear on the map.

The limited interest Canadians seem to evince regarding their North does not contradict the fact of a large number of characterizations of the North, as such. On the contrary, this apathy expresses rather the determining effect that excessively severe and painful images have produced on people's minds. An inadequacy of accurate knowledge has certainly not favoured the process of perception based on reliable stimuli, and conversely, it has tended to develop images full of distortions. A North that was poorly known at the outset could not avoid becoming the target of illusions and prejudices.

THE NORTH — A STATE OF MIND

In a White mining community in Alberta's Middle North, a test has shown that the most significant local factor was neither the cold nor the snow, but the friendly atmosphere; moreover, the principal desire of the inhabitants was a relative decrease in isolation. It was primarily by means of these two psychological terms that these residents defined their own situation most clearly. A traditional monograph on this locality would not have allowed one to pinpoint the deeper thoughts of the local population.¹⁹

The North is more than an area, it is a passion. The mental configuration which it inspires constitutes a trait as deeply anchored as a European's attachment to the site of his hamlet or his valley. Félix-Antoine Savard's Gildore²⁰ is more than just a simple canoeman from Rabasca; like other northerners, his route to the North lay through the "pays d'en haut" and the West. Other adventurers have served their northern apprenticeship in the "King's Posts" of the Quebec North Shore. Throughout history, certain types of men, coming into contact with the various zones of the North, have developed very characteristic attitudes. Could anybody have expressed or embodied better the virtues of liberty and vitality than the *coureur des bois* of the Middle North? For him, as with the logger of yesteryear, and even the moose hunter, the North is like an irresistible itch, which implacably drives the man to mobility. In certain cases, nothing succeeds in stifling the call of the North. Equally, one finds cases of escape into the North, where distance from the daily, monotonous round serves as nourishment, cure, and even renaissance. The North is not simply a thing of wonder, however. Fear, tragedy and bravery all emerge from one of the first novels written by an Eskimo.²¹ Northern themes have fed part of Canada's literature.²²

PERCEPTIONS DIFFER BETWEEN NORTH AND SOUTH

To analyse the northern setting by means of tests is to discover, in most instances, a difference between the views expressed by southerners and northerners.

A study of the regions preferred by forty-three second year geography honours students,²³ established that the mainland Arctic coast was the least desirable area of Canada; but yet, the design of the mental map did

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not include the northern part of the Arctic archipelago.²⁴ Conversely, the two preferred regions were southern Ontario, and southwestern British Columbia. This kind of differential appreciation of places could have very important consequences on the future development of the nation. The author concludes, "The preferred areas may well plan for sizeable increases in population and pollution; conversely, places which are particularly disliked may well plan on development being even more difficult than usual." If this trend is realized, intra-Canadian disparities are not likely to decrease. In Quebec, the North is again perceived differently from the South; a questionnaire distributed in the spring of 1971 included, among others, two sections relevant to the present topic: "As compared to the Montreal Plain, does the Quebec shore of Hudson Strait appear to you to be a region isolated from the minds of and misunderstood by the people of southern Quebec?"† The percentage of positive responses to the two parts of this question were 77% and 80% respectively.

Clearly, resident northerners are strongly aware of the uniqueness of their region, as one of the members of the Northwest Territories Council declared, "Our laws must harmonize with the land and its people. Unfortunately, Mr. Chairman, the laws that are continuously brought before this Council for enactment have been determined by, and patterned after, the laws which exist in the ten provinces of Canada. They are generally a carbon copy of provincial acts. The people who are in a policy-making capacity and drafting legislation, are people whose experience, primarily, has been in the South. Their understanding of people and their life style and society is of the South. This is what they understand. The life styles of the people are vastly different. Housing is a good example. The southern Caucasian society is concerned about good houses, they are concerned about security, they are concerned about worldly possessions, and there is nothing wrong with that, but the northern society is not concerned about these things.

"... the very differences that exist between the North and the South are climatic conditions and the vast distances that we are confronted with. Also we have a great many problems associated with liquor, different concepts of justice, health, work habits, and the skills of the people."²⁵ This extract from the official minutes of the Territories demonstrates the rift, which in the minds of northerners, separates the Canadian North from the Canadian South. It is not my intention here to discuss the value of the opinions expressed nor to consider whether they apply only to Amerindians.

TABLE 1.1 Percentage distribution of northern problems as seen by northern students

| Order | Problem perceived | Frequency of mention (per cent) |
|-------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 | Impact of development | 18.2 |
| 2 | Alcoholism | 15.2 |
| 3 | High cost of living | 13.7 |
| 4 | Isolation | 12.1 |
| 5 | Pollution | 10.6 |
| 6 | Cultural changes | 9.1 |
| 7 | Education | 9.1 |
| 8 | Housing | 4.5 |
| 9 | Abuses in welfare allocations | 4.5 |
| 10 | Amerindian land claims | 3.0 |
| Total | | 100.0 ²⁶ |

On another occasion, fifty school children with twelve years of education, and living in Frobisher Bay, Inuvik, and Yellowknife were asked what, according to their understanding, the problems of the North were (Table 1.1). In the interpretation, the reader should be made aware of two points. First, there is the originality of the northern implications of certain words in current usage. The problems of the North, associated with housing, alcoholism, and pollution assume a form and characteristics very different from those of the South. The same is true of cultural changes and development. Seen in their true dimensions, the school children's responses express greater nordicity than is apparent from the terms alone. Moreover, items 4 and 10 are manifestly northern. In the second place, this view of the North is not the back-country view; it reflects, rather, the urban location of the educational institutions, and the articulation of a sophisticated system of education. Regionally, it applies particularly to the Mackenzie District, which is waiting for its pipeline, and to the acute social problems of Frobisher Bay.

Northerners, both Whites and Amerindians, have a clear awareness of their difficult, misunderstood situation. Consequently, many have been moved to bitterness. "A large proportion of people interviewed express considerable dissatisfaction with their present life."²⁷ This attitude is translated into a desire to move (also among the Indians), into a pessimism with regard to the future, and into a high incidence of suicide. Attitudes of despair are so widespread that the con-

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cepts southern planners have applied to northern Canada must be questioned.

This attitude has been clearly exposed by researchers.²⁸ A test of perception on the economic development of the Northwest Territories sought to find out the degree of causal relations of "big business" with regard to certain parameters. According to Table 1.2, the judgement made by "enlightened" southerners with regard to major economic developments in the North is both significant and harsh. The North is not respected; Amerindians are almost totally ignored; northern public opinion is scarcely listened to at all; the territorial government wields only a limited influence; and ecology, whether cultural or natural, is not a matter of concern. Without any doubt, the South leads the North, flaunting a colonial, centralized, and purely capitalist form. Chapters 4, 7 and 8, in particular, will return to the characteristics of the North.

In conclusion, I believe that I have established the existence of images, especially their multifaceted nature. Hence, a cold region does not consist solely of measurable natural elements, capable of becoming the object of so-called natural and objective knowledge. All the polar components are analysed on their merits or not, by the mind; even the idea of cold becomes an identifying element. The North does not lend itself to a study of "realities"; tests and historical documents allow us to grasp partially the fruits of the cognitive processes themselves. One of the least known northern fields concerns the different images evoked by each ethnic group, regarding the same theme, for example, territoriality.

A simple concern with the liberal expansion of knowledge prompts some reflection on the attitudes that should be taken regarding the North. Official policy, for example, is a source of much anxiety. If it is true that southerners are not mentally northern-oriented,²⁹ and that their orientation is erroneous, or at least is different from that of northerners themselves, or that they are constantly torn between aspects of a double illusion, is it not therefore dangerous to permit southern Canadians to make major decisions concerning the country's North and to impose a form of government on northern areas? Moreover, do not the perceptions that the main northern groups hold of their own cultural differences beg that they rise up against the excesses of "homogeneous Canadianization?" Present policies stress legal niceties and engineers' designs, but perception of a "true" reality must also enter the current preoccupations (see Chapters 4, 5, and 6). Knowledge of psychology and the possession of some fellow-feeling may

TABLE 1.2 In the Territorial North, to what extent is Large-Scale Economic Development influenced or determined by

| Item | Level of Influence | |
|---|---------------------|--------------------|
| | To a greater extent | To a lesser extent |
| Resident Northerners | | x |
| Northern Native People | | x |
| Federal Politics | x | |
| Territorial Politics | | x |
| Northern Public Opinion | | x |
| Large Companies | x | |
| Smaller Economic Activities in the North | | x |
| Non-Economic (cultural) | | x |
| Ecological Considerations | | x |
| Concern for the Post-Developmental Era | | x |
| Southern Canada as a Whole | x | |
| Northern Regional Disparities | | x |

SOURCE: Based on a perception test, LEH, Toronto, 1974.

be of great help in understanding the northern people, native and otherwise.³⁰ Mental images can be found for each of the themes of the North, whether a person is dealing with territoriality, the environment, settlement, politics, peoples, or development.