



Jason Blake

University of Ljubljana
Faculty of Arts, English Department

From Fact to Fiction – An Introduction to the Mythology of Ice Hockey in Canadian Life and Literature

Summary

The title of Alice Munro's *Who do you think you are?* could just as easily be asked of Canada, without eliciting an easy answer. In ethnic, linguistic, even geographical terms, Canada is hardly homogeneous. Because of this, we can only dream of a unified identity; we are, as Leonard Cohen writes in *Beautiful Losers*, condemned to "nightmares of identity." If Canada is too complex for a uniform national identity, one derived from a convenient mythology and distilled into simple symbols, it often seems we have yet to realize it. We long for a mythology, even a modern, and blatantly constructed one. In contemporary Canadian society, ice hockey has filled that symbolic role, serving as a mythology that binds a fragmented people. This paper examines the role of ice hockey as a mythologized symbol of Canadian unity in literature, and questions the appropriateness of that usage.

Mitologija hokeja na ledu v kanadskem življenju in kanadski književnosti

Povzetek

Vprašanje, ki ga je zapisala Alice Munro v naslovu knjige *Who do you think you are?*, bi lahko zastavili Kanadčanom, vendar ne bi dobili preprostega odgovora. V etničnem, jezikovnem ali geografskem smislu Kanada ni homogena dežela. Samo sanjamo lahko o enotni identiteti, saj so po besedah Leonarda Cohena Kanadčani obsojeni na nočne more o identiteti. Kanada je preveč kompleksna, da bi imela enotno nacionalno identiteto, takšno ki izvira iz ustrezne mitologije in je pretvorjena v enostavne simbole. Toda zdi se, da Kanadčani hrepenijo po mitologiji, čeprav je ta moderna in jo morajo sami ustvariti. V sodobni kanadski družbi služi hokej kot mitologija, ki veže mozaik ljudi. Članek proučuje vlogo hokeja na ledu kot simbola združevanja Kanade v literaturi ter podvomi v primernost njegove uporabe.

From Fact to Fiction – An Introduction to the Mythology of Ice Hockey in Canadian Life and Literature

Introduction

In the list-crazed atmosphere at the end of the millennium pollsters asked Canadians to choose the key national event in our history. Though the rankings varied, the contenders for the top spot were predictable. They included Canada's birth in 1867, the usual battles in the usual wars and the complicated patriation of the Constitution in 1980. Birth, battles and constitutions: such generic nation-building events are hardly specific to Canadian history – change the dates, and most nations could find similar historical turning points. In almost every poll, however, Canadians deviated somewhat from world norms by choosing a 1972 Paul Henderson ice hockey goal against the Soviet Union as one of *the* defining Canadian events. The goal did not radically alter the course of Canadian history, but it has nevertheless been adopted as a symbol of what it means to be Canadian. That symbol will be the focus of this paper as it provides an introduction to and examines the role of ice hockey as a mythologized national symbol, while considering some of the factors that led to the adoption of that symbolism. The paper then considers the literary use of ice hockey as a unifying Canadian symbol.

Even when losing out for the gold medal, Paul Henderson's goal consistently placed among the top five events in various opinion polls. At the Dominion Institute, "a national charity dedicated to the promotion of Canadian history" (Griffith 2000, vii), it placed fifth:

"1972 Hockey Series began with a skilled Soviet team threatening Canadian hockey supremacy. Team Canada fought back and in the final seconds of the deciding game [...] Paul Henderson scored the winning goal." (summitseries)

Due to international hockey rules, professional players could not compete in tournaments such as the Olympics and the World Championships. Thus, the most skilled players had never represented Canada abroad. This 'Summit Series' was different. For the first time we were sending National Hockey League players to compete against the Soviets: the best of our best against the finest they could field. Of course, by sending our elite professional players onto the ice for eight games (four at 'home,' four more behind the Iron Curtain) we expected to win the series handily against those amateurs. As the *Canadian Encyclopedia* reports, the culmination in Moscow was something of a surprise: "Canada's narrow victory (with 4 victories, 3 losses and 1 tie) was tantamount to a national identity crisis." ("Hockey") Hockey was, after all, our game, our greatest contribution to international sport, and it had almost been taken away. To make matters worse, before Henderson redeemed Canada with that last-minute goal, another 'hero' intentionally slashed a Soviet player, breaking his leg, a third tried to attack a referee, and a team official ungraciously gave a one-finger

salute to his Moscow hosts (McKinley 2000, 267, 269). Despite the victory one would expect Canadians to forget this sporting event, to file it alongside Ben Johnson's positive drug test at the Seoul Olympics as a glitch on our sporting radar. Not so. With the laconic terseness indigenous to the genre, the *Canadian Encyclopedia* further observes that "[t]he 25th anniversary of the series (i.e., Canada's victory) was widely celebrated in Canada in 1997." In the words of hockey sociologist Michael Robidoux: "The event was a debacle, yet it is considered by many to be the greatest Canadian story ever told" (2002, 221). Given Canada's constant wrestling with its identity as a nation it is appropriately ironic that this 'national identity crisis' was 'widely celebrated.' 'The greatest Canadian story ever told' presents Paul Henderson's goal not as an emblem of an identity crisis but as a lofty sporting victory of biblical proportions. It should have been a boring series; our scouts in Moscow said Canada would defeat the Soviets by more than a dozen goals, and we ended up just scraping by (McKinley 2000, 253). In other words, something must have happened between the scoring of that goal and the celebrations that occurred a quarter century later. The historical occurrence, experienced as an identity crisis at the time, must somehow have been imbued with mythological import. The story that ended with that goal has provided Canadians with a question akin to the Americans' "Where were you when Kennedy was shot?" We ask, "Where were you when Henderson shot?"

If identity crises are symptomatic of whatever ails the modern world, Canada typifies all that is modern. The seemingly rhetorical title of Alice Munro's *Who Do You Think You Are?* could just as easily be asked of the nation as a whole, without eliciting an easy answer. Indeed, the reigning *topos* in discourse on Canada is that we can only dream of a unified identity. It is only recently that "[o]ur writers no longer feel they have to spend many pages proving that the Canada they know exists and is worth writing about" (Henighan 1997, 30). Even when that existence is not questioned, we create other problems for ourselves, such as our "uneasy, even neurotic, sense of Canadian inferiority" as compared to the cultural behemoth to the south (Keith 1990, 5). To the mighty American pumpkin, we feel like an onion: much smaller and densely layered. There is a constant fear that once the ethnic, linguistic and regional skins are removed no Canadian core will remain. But if we are onions in our layered identity, it follows that "Canadian writers [...] are perhaps primed for the paradoxes of the postmodern by their split sense of identity, both regional and national" (Hutcheon 1990, 20). If postmodernist theory tells us that unified identity is merely a dated conceptual construct and modernism is out, then Canadians are decidedly old-fashioned. We continue to suffer what Leonard Cohen in *Beautiful Losers* calls "nightmares of identity" (1993, 133). In frustration and in light of this Linda Hutcheon asks, "Why do Canadians still feel the need to publish books with titles like *A Passion for Identity?*" (1990, 21).

Like Hutcheon, author Neil Bissoondath argues that this passion for identity is extreme in Canada. However, he sees it in slightly different terms and feels it reaches fetish levels

when it comes to ethnic identity. For that 1972 hockey team those interested only in hockey would see a line of forward players consisting of Phil Esposito, Pete Mahovlich and Yvon Cournoyer; those obsessed with ancestry would see an Italian-Canadian, a Croatian-Canadian, and, if one will allow the tautology, a Québécois-Canadian. If we have taken a hockey team to embody Canadianness, at least this particular team reflects diverse heritages.¹ Turning the ethnic lens towards his daughter, Bissoondath focuses on the slippery slope that results from such ethnic concerns:

“With her mixture of heritages, should she one day be asked to define her ethnicity, she would be obliged to take a deep breath before replying that she is ‘a Franco-Québécoise-First Nations-Indian-Trinidadian-West-Indian-Canadian.’ [...] I do shudder, though, for the children she may one day have should she choose to have a family with someone of different but equally complex composition” (1994, 119).

Bissoondath laments our apparent reluctance to leave ethnic roots behind, and our corresponding obsession with ethnic origins. His book *Selling Illusions – The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada* claims that we have gone too far in our desire to embrace heritage, to the extent that it is no longer enough to be just Canadian. Such an argument implies that Canada *does* exist, along with a cultural core of some sort.

The well-documented problem we have is determining our cultural history – and by extension, our present – as a former colony (of France or England) housed next to a giant. Canada refuses to be simplified. It is, as former Prime Minister Joe Clark once stated, “a nation too big for simple symbols” and this “preoccupation with the symbol of a single national identity” both denies the reality of Canada’s diversity and obscures the wealth that springs from it (Clark 1998, 268). Canada “lacks a genuine sense of authoritarian culture” because no single “set of ideas has won over all the other competing ideas – at least not yet” (Cameron 1990, 127). Or, in the words of W. J. Keith, “for all the justified stress on traditional values, Canada is no longer, and can never be again, the homogeneous [and colonial] dream of the early Loyalists” (1990, 13). We may no longer remember the words to “Rule Britannia,” and we may be deeply suspicious of the American Dream, dismissing both as empty mythology, yet we remain keenly aware of such mythologies. We remain aware of it as a hungry man is conscious of food, namely as a lack:

“Sailors, lost on the oceans, become experts in spotting signs of land. Residents of the Sahara grow learned in the location of water. And Canadians are authorities on mythology. It is what we spectacularly lack and what we yearn to possess, what we fear may have eluded us and what we dream of finding or reclaiming” (Fulford 1988, 189).

We are unlikely to find or reclaim this mythology, either because it never existed, or, if it did exist, the cultural composition of Canada has changed too much for it to remain homogeneous.

¹ In “Imagining a Canadian Identity through Sport,” Michael Robidoux claims that hockey supplanted lacrosse as the national game partly *because* it was more open to ethnic diversity (2002, 218).

The mythology we long to find is a collection of stories that are – or at least once were – of central significance to a people. For the believers, these stories are comforting because they provide answers to existential questions: Where did we come from? Where are we going? This is the sense of myth as a ‘tale of the tribe’ that stems from a cultural “group rather than [being] the creation of an individual” (Holman 1972, 333). Thus, with the authority of perceived history and the strength of a community behind it, mythology can justify social practices and conventions, thereby providing a practical basis for a society. For those who oppose the dominant mythology and its conventions, myths exist as a precarious structure of falsehood, an authoritative house of cards that subjugates those who are not in power. This is the sense retained when we dismiss someone’s words as mere myth, that is, “a fiction or half-truth, esp. one that forms part of an ideology” (ITP 907). Either way, mythology is important to a people because it allows us to believe that we understand things, and even if we disagree with an ideology, we cannot deny the very real repercussions of that ideology. Hugh Holman’s *A Handbook to Literature* claims further that “[e]very country and literature has its mythology” (1972, 333). Except for Canada, it seems, as the Douglas LePan poem “A Country Without a Mythology” and Robert Fulford’s above comments attest. Rather than disputing definitions such as Holman’s and judging them too simplistic for our needs, Canadians implicitly embrace them in our search for identity. As a result, we are spiralled into an existential syllogism: If every country has its mythology, and Canada has no mythology, then Canada is not a country. A disturbing conclusion indeed. The solution? Create a mythology, even if it means making a myth out of a hockey victory.

To return to Paul Henderson, we turned the goal he scored into a heroic sporting achievement in hopes of answering that burning Canadian question: ‘Who do you think you are?’ Although it was a sporting case of East versus West, Capitalism versus Communism, politics and ideology were of secondary importance to Canadians.² This was not the Olympics. ‘Have you heard about the new Soviet weapon?’ asked a Canadian Cold War joke, ‘He plays left wing and can score from any angle.’ Mordecai Richler wittily points out the insignificance of Communism and the arms race in light of hockey. The difference between Canada and America is that our ideology is coloured by hockey floodlights: “So far as red-blooded Canadians are concerned, the real Russian menace to our manhood comes on ice” (Richler 2002, 203). Such humour indicates how sports are a classic means of carving out identity, be it individual, regional or national. In the introductory essay to *Sports, Identity and Ethnicity* Jeremy MacClancy adds a theoretical voice to Richler’s comments. More than games, sports “are vehicles of identity” that provide us with a means of classifying ourselves (MacClancy et al. 1996, 2). MacClancy also points out that “they may not be just a marker of one’s already established social identity but a means by which to create a new social identity for oneself as well” (ibid., 3). Sports, like flags or national anthems, are an outward sign to display what we want to be perceived as. In Canada this desire for national signs and symbols that help us perceive ourselves is strong. Thus, when politician Joe Clark argued against ‘simple symbols’ and our equally simplistic longing for a

² This is not to say that the political element was altogether ignored. “Canada’s victory marked an early Cold War triumph, a small crack in the credibility of the Soviet system” (Martin). Other NATO countries might have been less

‘single national identity’, Canadians did not want to hear such foolishness. Clark lasted only four months as Prime Minister. We do want symbols, even simplistic ones; it is just a question of *which* symbol, what mythology. The result of this desire is sometimes a smiling Mountie, but more often hockey-flavoured. At Expo 86 in Vancouver, a 60 metre hockey stick beckoned visitors to the Canada pavilion without a hint of irony: “In a nation where even the mention of language or geography can provoke rancorous debate, there wasn’t a peep of complaint about the stick as a symbol of nationhood” (Dowbiggin 2001, 180).

However, neither that mammoth hockey stick nor the elevation of Paul Henderson’s goal is mythology. The stick was a symbol, shorthand for some kind of national essence, and the goal was turned into a single myth within a larger mythology. This mythology is the belief that hockey is what binds the fragmented and disparate nation of Canada. To use Northrop Frye’s concept of mythology, the Expo 86 stick and the 1972 goal express the desire to “create a cultural history”, for “the real interest of myth is to draw a circumference around a human community [...]” (1981, 34, 37). But while Frye was writing of ancient myths, ones that pre-date written history, the mythologization of Paul Henderson’s goal emphasises the *created* aspect of our new mythology. Building and “defining a national identity is a creative process that requires constructing a shared history and mythology(ies) that best suit the identity *imagined* by those few responsible for responding to this task” (Robidoux 2002, 209; his emphasis). Robidoux, evoking Benedict Anderson’s famous phrase ‘imagined communities’, points out the obviously constructed quality of hockey as a mythology. Furthermore, given its youth (modern hockey is at best 150 years old), there is no claim that hockey’s movement from people’s sport to national fixation is from ‘time out of mind.’ This means that if hockey is a grand delusion, dreamed up by a powerful ‘few responsible,’ then Canada watched the very genesis of this grand delusion. The story was not handed down to us from past generations, rather we helped form it. The films of the sporting ‘debacle’ are available – including the official’s middle finger and the 1972 on-ice violence – but Canadians censor those details in favour of the goal, the final redemption.

Until now this paper has argued that the mythologization of hockey springs from the social desire for a national centre. Now for another, more traditional, national centre: literature. Sport may have the advantage as a creator of identity because it is “more readily comprehensible to the mass public” than tricky poems and novels, but literature, even today, retains the documenting strength of the written word (Riordan in MacClancy et al. 1996, 11) Canadian hockey fiction often melds the two, the fact-based social or historical and the purely invented truth that might or could happen. In Bill Boyd’s *Hockey Towns – Stories of Small Town Hockey in Canada*, the author claims that he is not after a symbolic code: “I’m not interested in hockey as a metaphor for Canadian life or whether it’s our wintry religion or a frozen chunk of our soul. I’ll leave that to the poets and the sociologists” (Boyd 1998, 3). Poets and sociologists: the individual creator and the one who examines the masses. Yet Boyd’s very title shows how the boundaries blur: from a collection of impressions of the

social role of hockey in real towns, the author creates ‘stories,’ thus adding to the ‘wintry religion.’ From the more poetical direction, novelists Mordecai Richler, Hugh Hood, Roch Carrier and David Adams Richards have helped immortalize flesh-and-blood hockey players or the game itself through biography, memoirs, or biographical sketches.³ Thus, like the (primarily American) writers of baseball literature, these and other authors have raised the status of the game through literature, helping to provide what Michael Oriard calls “a vital source of myth in a nearly mythless country” (Oriard in Harris 2000).

Though hockey is omnipresent in Canadian society, its literary presence beyond biography and memoirs is less pronounced. Nevertheless, its existence is palpable among men – and some women – of letters. Given that Canadians have a fond affection for ice hockey, it is understandable that this spectre should haunt the odd page of writing; hockey is, like the cold, a fact of life in the north. Even more, its existence requires the communion of two fundamental Canadian realities: water and the cold. The many lakes and rivers were the original passageway into Canada, and winter was the original nemesis. Ice is a symbol of winter tamed, even if winter itself does the taming. And, as the mythology would have it, we have an almost biological attraction to playing on it. We take to it like a duck to water, it would seem. This hyperbolic claim is made by author Levi Dronyk, though he tempers the statement with a sardonic voice: “any kid without an instinctive understanding of the game is genetically un-Canadian” (1997, 74). Like Richler’s hockey humour, this is revealing. Such an attitude shows a confusion of history – that is, the cultural – and nature. Water freezing is a natural process; playing hockey on that ice is a historical or cultural one. Bringing instinct and genetics to the equation is a literary extension of the typical “idealized, organic conception of hockey as a natural Canadian cultural resource, something that developed almost magically out of an exposure to ice, snow, and open spaces” (Gruneau and Whitson 1993, 26). In the chapter “God’s Zamboni” in Bruce Dowbiggin’s *The Stick*, the author explains the geological background that provided fertile ground for the trees from which we make hockey sticks. Just as a ‘Zamboni’ clears the ice at an arena, so did ‘God,’ in an almost Hegelian unfolding of history, clear the path for our national symbol (Dowbiggin 2001, 20–45).

Roy MacGregor, passionate hockey journalist and author, echoes these ideas of hockey as a genetic and historical necessity, while praising hockey’s prophetic powers:

“It’s who we are. It’s not what we do. It’s a cultural phenomenon rather than an athletic phenomenon [...]. Everything that happens in hockey tells us something about who we are and where we came from and where we’re going” (MacGregor in Jenkinson 2002). Who we are? Where we came from? Where we’re going? With these words, MacGregor propagates hockey as a revealing mythology, though he does return the game from the natural and

³ The recent collection of Mordecai Richler’s journalistic work *Dispatches from the Sporting Life* (2002) includes numerous articles on individual hockey players and teams; Hugh Hood and Roch Carrier published biographies of Montreal Canadiens greats Jean Beliveau and Maurice Richard; and the title of David Adams Richards’ *Hockey Dreams – Memories of A Man Who Couldn’t Play* makes its intentions clear. Also, Paul Quarrington has edited a collection of short stories called *Original Six – True Stories from Hockey’s Classic Era*. The stories are ‘true’ only in that

‘genetic’ to a more realistic ‘cultural phenomenon.’ Reading MacGregor’s words against a short story by Mick Burrs, entitled “My First Hockey Service,” we can see how Canadians are willing to move hockey to the sacred realm as well. In that story an ‘un-Canadian’ priest watches his first hockey game and comments on the strange mixture of spirituality, felt by his fellow spectators, and violence. The ‘Service’ in the title already points to the churchly, and the story itself provides for violence, as the players bash each other about during a Boxing Day game: “I know this is a sacred sport played and watched in every city and village in Canada. It has winners and losers who all pray fervently for grace and violence and victory. But now you can see why I am also assured: they don’t play hockey in heaven” (Burrs 1995, 89). The various puns throughout the tale underline the irony. The townspeople pray for ‘grace,’ including gracefulness on the ice, but the priest sees only violence and their misguided ‘religious’ fervour. Still, the priest is aware of hockey’s spell. Though new to the game, he is aware of the strange and unifying effect the game has on Canadians, or at least on his fellow spectators. But by failing to see any *gracefulness* on the ice, the priest exposes himself as an outsider, thereby highlighting the communal role of hockey to Canadians – those devout ones who pray for divine intervention *on* the ice. He takes up the position of Montesquieu’s Persians, providing the reader with the outsider’s distanced and critical viewpoint.

Morley Callaghan, a priestly insider in the Canadian canon, is apparently blind to hockey violence and sees only art. Writing during the Second World War, he states that hockey “has taken on the role of a national folk play [...or] a great orchestral tone poem [...with] the solitary undaunted figure of the goaltender as the classic figure of the man standing against fate” (Callaghan 1989, 52). ‘Folk’ and ‘fate’ – the vocabulary does not differ greatly from that of Burrs’ priest, but the ‘true Canadian’ hears harmony in this tone poem, the priest only dissonance. However, Callaghan is not merely waxing nostalgic about the game. He uses hockey to criticize xenophobic views in Nazi Germany and at home. The beauty for Callaghan is that the game belongs to Canadian culture, not to a race. There is no hockey gene: “I sometimes wonder if those maidenly souls who write proper pieces on the undesirability of certain racial groups [...] have ever let their eyes wander down a score sheet [...] in the National Hockey League” (ibid., 51). The score sheet is peppered with names that hardly evoke “your favorite neighbourhood in Toronto or even the older settlements in Ontario” – a clear reference to the stale dream of a homogeneous anglophone society (ibid.). The game, after all, is played by those with “Anglo-Saxon faces and Scandinavian faces and Italian and Slavic faces” (ibid., 50). Callaghan refers to hockey in order to critique racist immigration policies.⁴ Callaghan’s argument against racism rests on the allusive power of Canada’s national sport. It works because hockey, as journalist Peter Gzowski states, “was the common Canadian coin,” the cultural currency used by all (1981, 79). Despite its violence, hockey rivals the weather as a conversation-starter. Canadians pride themselves on living in a peaceful, if somewhat sleepy, society. It is therefore “difficult to comprehend why a game such as hockey, known for its ferocity, speed, and violence, would come to serve as Canada’s

⁴ Echoing in the background of Callaghan’s article is the anonymous Canadian government official who, infamously, stated “None is too many” when asked about post-war Jewish immigration to Canada.

primary national symbol” (Robidoux 2002, 209). Robidoux answers his own question from a sociological point of view, arguing convincingly that hockey served as a means of cultural “resistance against British and American hegemony” (ibid., 221). It was not cricket (as in the idiom meaning ‘not run according to English ethic of fair play’), and that, says Robidoux, is one of the reasons why the game attracted Canadians (ibid.).

Canadian writers tend to discuss hockey according to a narrower view of culture, as art. In the preface to his play *Les Canadiens* Rick Salutin says “[H]ockey is probably our only universal cultural symbol. It is universal not because every Canadian has played the game – everyone hasn’t. But even those who haven’t played hockey [...] nevertheless relate to the game” (1977, 11). Speaking in a similar vein, in his introduction to a collection of hockey fiction David Gowdey states that it is “the one truly Canadian art form” (1989, x). Glenn Gould and Oscar Peterson may have mastered the world’s stages with their piano playing, but they did it playing Germany’s Bach and America’s jazz; Margaret Atwood and Michael Ondaatje may collect international prizes for their novels, but the novel is not a Canadian form. The form of hockey, according to Gowdey and Salutin, *is* distinctly Canadian and that is why we can relate to it. As novelist, historian, and cultural critic John Ralston Saul puts it: “This is probably because every Canadian male has played hockey at some age or ends up *believing* he has” (1997, 144; my emphasis). But notice the difference between the indicative surety of Gzowski and Salutin’s claims and the ironical undertone of Saul’s *bon mot*. Even if we have never laced up skates or been bruised by a puck, the cultural dominance of hockey in Canada makes us believe that we have. If hockey is crucial to Canadian existence, being Canadian is enough to understand it; actually playing the game is no longer necessary to appreciating and conversing about it with a player’s inside perspective. Hockey has moved from played and experienced reality into belief, the symbolic puck has slid from a real past to a mythical one, where we all skated around within the communal confines of a frozen river or rink. This is myth in the sense of an all-encompassing narrative with which all Canadians identify, but also in the sense of error. Believing that you have played a game you never have played is pure delusion.

These have been less literary hockey quotes than quotes by the literati about hockey. The most prominent and popular portrayal of hockey in Canadian literature is surely Roch Carrier’s short story “*Une abominable feuille d’érable sur la glace*,” or (in Sheila Fischman’s translation) “The Sweater.” Written in a stripped-down prose accessible to child and adult alike, “The Sweater” uses hockey in rural Québec as a means of providing a comical insight into the linguistic and cultural tensions of pre-Quiet Revolution Québec. Though the story focuses on hockey as a creator of identity in a single community, the pattern is familiar to all Canadians. As Anouk Bélanger states in her examination of hockey and identity in Québec, the difference is only one of degrees. “[T]he roots of hockey seem to run even deeper in Québec society and culture than elsewhere in Canada, and extend into the Québécois’ collective memory and imagination. One of the major reasons for this lies in the extent to which hockey has been understood *symbolically* in Québec as part of its national identity [...]” (Bélanger 1996,

293f). Carrier's tale shows this symbolic importance through the eyes of a child who reveres the hockey hero Maurice Richard.

A young Québécois boy, having grown out of his beloved Montreal Canadiens sweater, has his mother write to Eaton's, a Toronto-based – that is, anglophone – department store, for a new one. Told from the perspective of the boy, the mail-order delivery mix-up proves Kafkaesque:

“That day I had one of the greatest disappointments of my life! I would even say that on that day I experienced a very great sorrow. Instead of the red, white and blue Montreal Canadiens sweater, Monsieur Eaton had sent us a blue and white sweater with a maple leaf on the front – the sweater of the Toronto Maple Leafs. I'd always worn the red, white and blue Montreal Canadiens sweater; all my friends wore the red, white and blue sweater; never had anyone in my village ever worn the Toronto sweater, never had we even seen a Toronto Maple Leafs sweater” (Carrier 1998, 263).

Like the priest in Burrs' tale, the boy is now an outsider. Even worse, he has been ostracized from the community, or at least believes he is being forced to the margins. Drawing a circumference around a community necessarily means shutting out; there is no inclusion without exclusion. In “The Sweater” the community is already closed, but it takes the ‘outsider’ in the blue sweater to expose this closed quality. This theme is made explicit in the tale when the hero receives a penalty: “That was too much! It was unfair! It was persecution! It was because of my blue sweater!” (ibid., 265). The only boy on the ice not obviously imitating Maurice Richard by wearing a red, white and blue sweater, he feels attacked for displaying minor difference.

Though Clark Blaise's “I'm Dreaming of Rocket Richard” evokes Carrier's tale of “The Rocket” (Richard's nickname), it is a far more sombre story. Again we have a young Québécois boy who reveres Maurice Richard, again we have that same boy donning the wrong jersey instead of the famous number 9 of the Canadiens star. This time, however, it is a Boston Bruins jersey that was intentionally given to the boy: “The Bruins sweatshirt came from a cousin of mine in Manchester, New Hampshire, who brought it as a joke or maybe as a present on one of his trips to see us” (Blaise 1995, 196). Regardless of whether or not it was a gag-gift, the boy wears it with pride. The reason becomes obvious as the tale unwinds itself; whereas Carrier's ‘tragic’ hero belonged to a linguistically homogeneous rural community, essentially unaware of the outside anglophone world – the boys of Carrier's village had ‘never even seen a Toronto Maple Leafs sweater’ – Blaise's hero inhabits the multi-ethnic world of Montreal:

“In the mornings I would rise at a quarter to five and pick up a bundle of *Montreal Matins* [...]. Seventy papers I had, and I could run with the last thirty-five, firing them up on second- and third-floor balconies, stuffing them into convenient grilles, and marking with hate all those buildings where the Greeks were moving in or the Jews had already settled [...] (ibid., 195).

Carrier's hero is felled by the anglophone Toronto sweater, but here it is the French-language newspaper that is the intrusive element being forced into the 'convenient grilles.' "The Toronto team was regularly trounced by the triumphant Canadiens," writes Carrier (1998, 264), but in Blaise feelings of linguistic and cultural inferiority resound. The *Montreal Matins* "weren't good enough to wrap their garbage in" (Blaise 1995, 195). In response to this the boy wears the Boston Bruins sweater in hopes of escaping to another culture, that of his almost-anglophone mother. Although he speaks no English, the identification with the American relatives evokes Linda Hutcheon's earlier 'split sense of identity' – a theme that painfully plays itself out in the story. The Boston Bruins sweater becomes a symbolic means of displaying the difference the hero feels, for he both identifies with and longs to distance himself from the Montreal team and all it represents:

"Crazy, I think now; what was going on inside me? [...] Anyone could see I was a good local kid; maybe I'd wanted someone to think I'd come all the way from Boston just to see the game, maybe I liked the good-natured kidding from my fellow standees [in the standing-room section] ("ey, you Boston," they'd shout, "oo's winning, eh?" and I'd snarl back after a period or two of silence, "*mange la baton, sac de marde...*")" (ibid., 196).

By dressing like the cousin from New Hampshire yet cursing in French, the boy takes up a position between cultures; but the omnipresent cultural factor is still hockey, as symbolized by the jersey. Unlike the 'hateful' delivery of the newspaper to Greek and Jewish areas, the teasing at the hockey arena is 'good-natured.' Escaping beyond hockey is not an option.

On a trip to Florida – they travel there in the hopes that the boy's alcoholic father will be able to find a new job – the father takes his shirt off in the December heat to reveal a tattoo of none other than Maurice Richard. For the *pure laine* Québécois father, the Rocket is not merely cheered for at the hockey arena, he is carved into the flesh:

"The tattoo pictured a front-faced Rocket, staring at an imaginary goalie and slapping a rising shot through a cloud of ice-chips. Even though I loved the Canadiens and the Rocket mightily, I would have preferred my father to walk shirtless down the middle of the street with a naked woman on his back than for him to strip for [...] my enormous cousins [...]. They thought his tattoo was a kind of tribal marking, like kinky hair, thin moustaches, and slanty eyes – that if I took off my shirt I'd have one too, only smaller" (ibid., 200).

In this passage the phrase 'tribal marking' introduces Maurice Richard as an icon, an object of uncritical devotion, a liberator who carried the destiny of all Québec on his shoulders, as a popular *chanson* suggested (Létourneau). At the same time, the boy rejects the image out of simple embarrassment – a Québécois manifestation of Keith's 'uneasy, even neurotic, sense of Canadian inferiority' – rather than a concern that the tattoo is too simplistic in its 'tribal' symbolism. Though this is a short story, it merges with the Paul Henderson mythologization postulated at the outset of this paper. Each player fulfils the "need for heroes in a country

that [...] ‘couldn’t seem to find in its own past or present many people on whom to lavish worship’” (Bélanger 1996, 298). In Québec that hero was Maurice Richard. Rick Salutin considers the uniqueness of Maurice Richard in the preface to his play *Les Canadiens*, a play structured around hockey and Montreal Canadiens stars of the past: “I had thought Rocket would be one of the line of Canadian greats in the play [...]. But it became clear that the Rocket was *sui generis*. He *was* the Canadiens, in some unique way [...].” (Salutin 1977, 10). He was the epitome of hockey prowess, but his continual rendering in literature shows that he was more than that. He became a symbol of the *Ur-Québécois*, and at the same time a symbol of all that Québec can and should be: a symbol of resistance against English Canada, just as hockey itself represented, as stated above, resistance against Britain and America, the literal and figurative colonial powers.

When Carrier’s Leaf-clad hockey player arrives at the ice rink to take up his position: “all the Maurice Richards in red, white and blue came up, one by one, to take a look” (Carrier 1998, 264). There is a practical reason for referring to the other players as ‘Maurice Richards’ – they all wear the same sweater. But when juxtaposed against the anglophone Toronto Maple Leafs jersey, the term Maurice Richard becomes synonymous with “Québécois.” The same is seen in Salutin’s *Les Canadiens*, where he uses the framework of a hockey game to outline two hundred years of Canadian history, to make it all make sense to us (not unlike Callaghan’s use of the game, cited above, as an argumentative crutch in his critique of racism). As in Carrier’s short story, Salutin uses hockey as a template to help us understand the complexities of Canadian history. The figure of Maurice Richard provides Québec society with a centre, “because,” as adoring fans chant in *Les Canadiens*, “you’re the centre, and the centre is Québécois” (Salutin 1977, 99). If hockey is the mythology of Canada and Québec, Henderson, Richard and their ilk are the gods. This centrality of hockey and Richard is thematized in Blaise’s story too. At the end of “I’m Dreaming of Rocket Richard,” the nameless narrator finds himself lost in a sea of English in Florida and turns to the radio as a way out: “I go to it hoping to catch something I can understand, a hockey game, the scores, but all I get wrenching the dial until it snaps is Bing Crosby dreaming of a white Christmas and Cuban music and indecipherable commentary from Havana, the dog races from Miami, *jai alai*” (Blaise 1995, 201). Without hockey, without Maurice Richard to dream of, there seems to be only confusion and linguistic fragmentation. In other words, there is no societal centre.

And what did Richard himself have to say about his role as a skating god, a mythological figure? “I was just a hockey player. Just a hockey player” (Salutin 1977, 9). Though Salutin uses the mythology of hockey, he does so critically, hoping that “the myth of les Canadiens” would be replaced “by the reality of ‘just a hockey team’” because “[i]f the problem is political, then the solution must be political, not symbolic” (ibid., 21).

Conclusion

We may argue about whether a solution has been, or even can be, found to our identity issues, and whether hockey is too simplistic a symbol for Canada, but recently hockey and hockey literature have found a new home at the centre of Canadian society. Gzowski's claim that 'hockey was the common Canadian coin' has proved prophetic. Though the maple leaf adorns the penny, and the beaver still graces the nickel, since 2001 the new Canadian five-dollar bills feature Roch Carrier's words, along with a drawing of children playing on the ice. If the United States say "In God We Trust," Canadians put their trust – both emotionally and now financially – in hockey: "The winters of my childhood were long, long seasons. We lived in three places – the school, the church and the skating-rink – but our real life was on the skating-rink" (Canadian/ Carrier 1998, 263).

Bibliography

- Bélanger, A. 1996. The Last Game? Hockey and the Experience of Masculinity In Québec. In MacClancy et al., eds., 293-309.
- Bissoondath, N. 1994. *Selling Illusions – the Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada*. Toronto: Penguin.
- Blaise, C. 1995. I'm Dreaming of Rocket Richard. In *From Ink Lake*, ed. M. Ondaatje, 195-202. Toronto: Vintage.
- Boyd, B. 1998. *Hockey Towns – Stories of Small Town Hockey in Canada*. Toronto: Random House.
- Burrs, M. 1995. My First Hockey Service. In *That Sign of Perfection: From Bandy Legs to Beer Legs: Poems and Stories on the Game of Hockey*, ed. J. B. Lee, 88-9. Windsor, Ontario: Black Moss Press.
- Callaghan, M. 1989. The Game that Makes a Nation. In Gowdey, ed., 50-2. Toronto: MacMillan.
- Cameron, B. 1990. English Critical Discourse on/in Canada. In *Studies on Canadian Literature – Introductory and Critical Essays*, ed. A. E. Davidson, 111-24. New York: Modern Language Association of America.
- Canadian Five-Dollar Bill. 2001. Bank of Canada.
- Carrier, R. 1998. The Hockey Sweater. Trans. S. Fischman. In *Who Speaks for Canada? Words that Shape a Country*, eds. D. Morton and M. Weinfeld, 263-5. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.
- Clark, J. 1998. Community of Communities. In *Who Speaks for Canada? Words that Shape a Country*, eds. D. Morton and M. Weinfeld, 267-9. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.
- Cohen, L. 1993. *Beautiful Losers*. New York: Vintage.
- Davidson, A. E., ed. 1990. *Studies on Canadian Literature – Introductory and Critical Essays*, ed. A. E. Davidson. New York: Modern Language Association of America.
- Dowbiggin, B. 2001. *The Stick – A history, a celebration, an elegy*. Toronto: Macfarlane, Walter and Ross.
- Dronyk, L. 1997. The Puck Artist. In *Our Game: An All-Star Collection of Hockey Fiction*, ed. D. Beardsley. Victoria, B.C.: Polestar.
- Friend, D., J. Keeler, D. Liebman and F. Sutherland, eds. 1997. *Canadian Dictionary of the English Language*. Toronto: ITP Nelson.
- Frye, N. 1981. *The Great Code – The Bible and Literature*. New York: Harvest/HBJ.
- Fulford, R. 1988. *Best Seat in the House – Memoirs of a Lucky Man*. Toronto: Collins.
- Gowdey, D., ed. 1989. *Riding on the Roar of the Crowd: A Hockey Anthology*. Toronto: Macmillan.
- 1989. Foreword. In Gowdey, ed., ix-xi.
- Griffith, R., ed. 2000. *Great Questions of Canada*. Toronto: Stoddart.

- Gruneau, R., and Whitson, D. 1993. *Hockey Night in Canada – Sport, Identities and Cultural Politics*. Toronto: Garamond Press.
- Gzowski, P. 1981. *The Game of Our Lives*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.
- Harris, C. B. 2000. The Sporting Life. *American Book Review* 21, no. 3 (March/April). 20 Oct. 2002, <http://www.litline.org/ABR/Issues/Volume21/Issue3/charris.pdf>
- Henighan, T. 1997. *Ideas of North*. Vancouver: Raincoast Books.
- "Hockey". 1999. *The Canadian Encyclopedia 2000 World Edition*. CD-Rom. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc.
- Holman, H. 1972. *A Handbook to Literature*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Inc.
- Hutcheon, L. 1990. The Canadian Postmodern: Fiction in English since 1960. In Davidson, ed., 18–23.
- Jenkinson, D. 2002. "Roy MacGregor – Profile." *Canadian Review of Materials*. 25 Oct. 2002, <http://www.umanitoba.ca/cm/profiles/mcgregor.html>
- Keith, W. J. 1990. Third World America: Some Preliminary Considerations. In Davidson, ed., 5–17.
- Létourneau, P. 1971. *Maurice Richard*. GSI Musique.
- MacClancy, J. 1996. Sport, Identity and Ethnicity. In *Sport, Identity and Ethnicity*, ed. J. MacClancy, S. Ardener, T. Dragadze, and J. Webber, 1–12. Oxford: Berg Publishers.
- Martin, L. A bodycheck to communism. *The Globe and Mail*. 17 Sep. 2002: A17.
- McKinley, M. 2000. *Putting a Roof on Winter*. Vancouver: Greystone.
- Oriard, M. 1982. *Dreaming of Heroes*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall.
- Pelletier, Joe. 2002. The Greatest Event In Canadian History? 25 Oct. 2002, <http://www.1972summitseries.com/greatestevent.html>
- Richards, D. A. 2001. *Hockey Dreams – Memories of A Man Who Couldn't Play*. Toronto: Anchor.
- Richler, M. 2002. Soul on Ice. In *Dispatches from the Sporting Life*, ed. M. Richler, 203–9. Toronto: Knopf.
- Riordan, J. 1977. *Sports in Soviet Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Robidoux, M. 2002. Imagining a Canadian Identity through Sport: A Historical Interpretation of Lacrosse and Hockey. *Journal of American Folklore Spring* 115 (Spring): 209–36.
- Salutin, Rick. 1977. *Les Canadiens*. Vancouver: Talonbooks.
- Saul, J. R. 1997. *Reflections of a Siamese Twin – Canada at the End of the Twentieth Century*. Toronto: Viking.