

“Does Alberta have a culture?”



A Vancouver acquaintance asks me about AlbertaViews. “We try to provide a fresh perspective on Alberta culture,” I offer brightly. “Does Alberta have a culture?” he says, surprised. All the Albertans in the room laugh.

Let’s overlook the ignorance about Violet Archer, Robert Kroetsch, Illingworth Kerr, Douglas Cardinal, Anne Wheeler, Decidedly Jazz Dance, Medalta pottery, the Citadel Theatre, not to mention Ian Tyson and W. O. Mitchell. After all, aren’t Albertans more likely to see Star Wars, watch Seinfeld or Friends, listen to Pearl Jam, wear Levis, drink Coke, and buy Cosmopolitan or Sports Illustrated than, say, read an Alberta magazine?

Does Alberta have a culture—a distinctive way of seeing and doing things? The Vancouverite refers also, of course, to the stereotype of the Alberta redneck. Who gets a red neck? Someone working in the sun: farming, ranching, drilling for oil—occupations that are the backbone of our economy. Life on the frontier has given us an ethos of individualism, independence, self-reliance, resourcefulness and freedom from conventions. We seem to believe that we can elude the effects of culture. As Nellie McClung once said, “Here, we do not worry about precedents—we make our own!”

Indeed, the Prairie provinces were the first to allow women to vote. Alberta appointed the first female magistrate in the British Empire, Emily Murphy, in 1916. Alberta elected the first woman to public office in the British Empire, Louise McKinney, MLA, in 1917. This may say as much about Alberta as it does about these remarkable women.

At the same time, Alberta was the first province to enact legislation to sterilize the so-called “feeble minded.” It has been argued that the category of “feeble mindedness” was in effect created by mass education when, for the first time, entire populations of children were subjected to tests. Those who met middle class norms were declared normal and those who didn’t were considered feeble minded.

The justification for sterilization came from eugenics, the belief that defects are inherited. To cleanse the race, defective individuals were not to be allowed to pass on their genes. This belief blames the individual in

spite of the fact that many factors affect achievement. Intelligence is affected by brain injury, diseases, emotional trauma. Performance on IQ tests is affected by nutrition, language, social class origin. Social success is affected by social conditions, opportunities, structures of privilege and prejudice. These have nothing to do with flawed genes.

Nonetheless, Alberta embraced eugenics. In *Our Own Master Race*, Angus McLaren tells us about a 1919 Alberta survey which “asserted that the recent wave of Slavic immigrants suffered from high levels of feeble mindedness, a finding enthusiastically hailed by Anglo Saxons. Finding it impossible to empathize with the plight of strangers in a strange land, they put down as evidence of slowness the confusion of the new arrivals.”

McClung, Murphy and McKinney supported the eugenics movement.

The Sexual Sterilization Act of 1928, passed by the UFA (United Farmers of Alberta) government, required consent of the patient or guardian. But the Social Credit government removed the requirement for consent in 1937. This Act stayed on the books until 1971, a quarter century after compulsory sterilization was declared a crime against humanity, at Nuremberg.

Why was Alberta particularly receptive to the eugenics movement? Perhaps it was our individualism—this inclination to hold the individual solely responsible for his fate and to dismiss the effects of circumstance, environment, social conditions and, paradoxically, culture.

Individualism seems to inform public policy in Alberta of late. Government has shifted more and more responsibility to the individual. If kids are going hungry, it’s their parents’ fault. If homelessness is rising, it’s the street people’s fault. Cutbacks, unemployment policy, hospital closures have nothing to do with it. Government has enormous potential to transform society and make better lives for all Albertans. Rather than shrinking government’s role, we should make good use of government. Perhaps Premier Klein’s recent reorganization indicates a change in this direction.

Does Alberta have a culture? I think we’ll understand ourselves better if, instead of seeing ourselves only as individuals, we see ourselves as part of a culture.

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