

*Citizen's Plus: Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian
Nation State*

by Alan Cairns, UBC Press, 2000

viii + 280 pp., \$39.95 cloth

First Nations? Second Thoughts

by Thomas Flanagan, McGill-Queen's Press, 2000

vii + 245 pp., \$24.95 paper

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The issue of how Aboriginal people choose to identify themselves has become a growing concern as the push for Aboriginal self-governance in Canada gains momentum, a position echoed by two recent publications whose authors investigate the complexities of Aboriginal/Canadian citizenship. *Citizen's Plus: Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian Nation State*, by Alan Cairns, and *First Nations? Second Thoughts*, by Thomas Flanagan, both examine the consequences enacting Aboriginal self-governance will have upon an already culturally fragmented Canadian society. Surprisingly, for two books written from such dissimilar positions, they are splendid companion pieces that serve to provide an excellent overview of the current debate's principal issues. Cairns debates the advantages of recognizing a Canadian federation made up of a culturally diverse citizenship, while Flanagan attempts to persuade the reader as to the reasons why Aboriginal people would benefit by assimilating into the greater Canadian social fabric.

Following an initial review of both volumes, it became clear that evaluating these books in a

combined review posed a problem. This was due primarily to the audience each author was writing to. It is apparent that Cairns is writing to an informed audience composed primarily of academics and lawyers, both groups of which are cognizant of the materials he utilizes and the purpose of his discussion. Flanagan, on the other hand, is writing not for the academician but rather the lay reader who may be interested in Aboriginal issues and how they currently affect Aboriginal policy development in Canada. The best example of this disparity is in how each author details the history of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations, histories which are quite dissimilar, each designed to meet the each author's specific needs. Read together, however, these two works provide ample insight and a well-rounded view into the myriad issues currently surrounding the push for Aboriginal self-governance and economic development.

Citizen's Plus represents a significant contribution to the discussion of how relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples can be better promoted and nurtured, albeit

from a strictly Canadian-centric point of view. As such, there are ample examples of Cairn's reliance upon western political theory in the development of his arguments with minimal concern paid to examining these issues from a strictly Native perspective. Despite these limitations, Cairns argues that the establishment of a middle ground from which legislative and policy decisions can be effectively created is possible, encouraging from Aboriginal people input into the policy process. Drawing extensively on an impressively in-depth bibliography and more than four decades analysis of Canadian Aboriginal issues, this contributor to the Hawthorn Report not only submits that cultural conflicts can be minimized, he goes so far as to outline how he sees this middle ground evolving. Stating that Aboriginal peoples can pursue self-governance and retain their cultural identity all the while acknowledging their role as citizens within the Canadian federation, Cairns rails against a culturally fragmented citizenry while also stressing the interconnectedness of contemporary Canadian society.

Utilizing the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) proceedings as the catalyst for his discussions, Cairns provides a comprehensive appraisal of the RCAP's accomplishments without being apologetic for what he views as weaknesses in both approach and conclusions. Arguing that RCAP was too concentrated on promoting Aboriginal bands as nations, Cairns suggests it is possible for a unique and inclusive Canadian culture to evolve. He then proceeds with a logical, structured essay which deals with many of the pitfalls that will accompany the evolution of this middle ground, a realm that will be achieved *sans* influence of the Canadian political elite who may view cultural homogeneity as a positive step in the evolution of Aboriginal/Canadian relations. In this instance, citizenship is viewed as the key factor, although Cairns pays little attention in his analysis to allowing Aboriginal peoples and their representative nations the time required to find their niche within the Canadian political superstructure. For instance, when one looks at how long it took a country such as Canada to establish its political and economic foundations, a period which encompasses centuries, it is somewhat optimistic to assert that the Canadian Aboriginal community should be able to quickly reestablish the necessary political and economic infrastructure.

Cairns is adamant in his assessment although he neglects to recognize that Aboriginal people in Canada must first gain an effective economic foothold combined with the reintegration of cultural institutions, prior to making the enormous leap to Canadian citizenship as proposed. This results in the feeling that *Citizen's Plus* is somewhat premature, and that until these economic foundations take root, the arguments presented here will remain peripheral to the issues that consume Aboriginal leaders, the foremost being the establishment of stable and productive local economies which aid in nation building. All limitations aside, *Citizen's Plus* will be an invaluable resource to aid in fostering a society which Aboriginal people and Canadian citizens can be viewed as distinct peoples whose cultural foundations are diverse and varied, yet who are able to live with one another under the Canadian aegis. However, what is not presented clearly is whether or not Aboriginal people, be it the political elite or those community members representing the grassroots, view these issues similarly; hence, this book will act simply as one opinion in the evolving discourse on Canadian/Aboriginal relations.

But for now, those looking for a comprehensive vehicle to better understanding the many issues surrounding self-governance and Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations, *Citizen's Plus* should be their first choice. It is well-balanced as Cairns takes the time to present both the positive and negative aspects behind the current push for self-governance. There are some dubious suggestions the reader needs to be aware of. For instance, Cairns lobbies for Aboriginal people to adopt blinders to shield themselves from the memory of past injustices, the goal being to progress toward accepting Canadian citizenship for ease of self-government negotiations and relationship-building with Canada's citizenry. Additionally, the author often ignores how RCAP was seeking to preserve the current reserve system, but not at the expense of urban-Aboriginal populations as he alludes. These are, however, multi-faceted questions that, while in this case left unanswered, were at least included in his overall evaluation and viewed as contributing factors that will undoubtedly require analysis in the near future.

Interestingly, *First Nations? Second Thoughts* acts as an excellent companion piece to *Citizen's Plus*, although Flanagan rejects Cairns' notion of Aboriginal peoples as Canadian citizens in favour

of a more militant tone that echoes assimilation rhetoric of the late 19th century policy-makers and politicians. Unfortunately, to come out with a meandering diatribe such as this takes neither courage nor ambition. This represents at the most subtle level the racist dogma that has evolved of late of which Aboriginal peoples are the targets, a book veiled in the language of equality all the while espousing the need to ignore the rights of a minority population for the benefit of the greater Canadian society. Flanagan achieves this through the perpetuation of stereotypes and the biased application of statistics designed to fit the author's overall goal of presenting Aboriginal peoples as an uncivilized populace who are unwilling to shake the social pathologies he suggests proliferate all reserve communities. Further, it is implied that the reason for this is so Aboriginal people may prosper from the accompanying welfare monies, which in turn are utilized to form the base of these communities' economies.

Although the presentation is somewhat sensationalistic, a brief background about the author is required to better understand his approach. Flanagan, it must be remembered, was one of the key architects of Reform Party policy that has endured into the 21st century. Reform (present-day Canadian Alliance Party) policy is steeped also in the language of equality that simultaneously emphasizes that Aboriginal peoples are entitled to special privileges other Canadians are not simply due to racial difference. Further, Flanagan is a political scientist whose education is steeped in the discourse that not only permitted but encouraged the dispossession of North American Aboriginal peoples, as evidenced by his generous use of Hobbes, Locke, and Vattel (to name a few) to aid in the formation of his arguments regarding civilization and current Aboriginal land utilization policies he deems inefficient. All that said, for the informed reader, it is readily apparent why one of Flanagan's main arguments, that "it is only a matter of time until the former (civilized) extend their sway over the latter (uncivilized)," (60) reads as it does.

At the heart of *First Nations? Second Thoughts* is the notion that there is an Aboriginal orthodoxy that determines public policy towards Canada's Aboriginal peoples, and with the exception of the elite few who benefit financially, this orthodoxy exacerbates the social and economic difficulties currently being experienced

at the community level. He then follows by systematically deconstructing this orthodoxy, which consists of eight points (pp. 6-8). He tackles issues such as Aboriginal sovereignty (he does not believe pre-contact Aboriginal people were sovereign), Aboriginal nationhood (Flanagan states these were tribal communities, not nations), and first occupation, which the author claims is irrelevant since the entire North American population is composed of immigrants.

In doing so, Flanagan proposes the abolition of the reserve system, and that Aboriginal individuals be given the opportunity to own private parcels of land. Not only will this encourage in Aboriginal people the want to seek out work required to purchase and maintain said holdings, the author also views this approach as the most effective means of integrating reserve economies with those micro-economies that combine to form the larger Canadian economy. Flanagan is unyielding in his promotion of private property as the key to promoting economic self-sufficiency at the reserve level, although he states that "Canada's aboriginal people seem . . . far from attaining a workable system of property rights" (133). This is interesting as nowhere in his book does he quote an Aboriginal leader who is fully supportive of exchanging the reserve system for one that promotes private land ownership; nor does he give an example of a reserve community actively engaged in this process.

Even more troubling is the fact that his statistical base is gleaned almost exclusively from journalism articles, which in many cases appear to have been chosen to fit his thesis. Upon closer scrutiny, close to twenty per cent of the sources utilized for the production of this book were newspaper clippings culled from sources as diverse as the Calgary Herald, The National Post, and the Globe and Mail, which were bolstered by larger pieces from magazines such as Alberta Report. This is troublesome as these journalists, who may be recognized as experts in their field, are not experts in the field of statistical analysis nor political studies. The extensive use of news clips should be questioned, especially when a professional academic such as Flanagan has access to the resources which could easily confirm the veracity of the data he chooses to utilize.

Flanagan does take time to outline his concerns regarding economy as a prerequisite for legitimate government, although these potentially significant arguments pale in comparison to the

number of inconsistencies that obscure the reading of *First Nations? Second Thoughts*. For example, the author rails against stereotypes being utilized by the courts that typecast "aboriginal title as collective" which in turn makes entrance into a modern market economy difficult. Yet Flanagan clearly states that funding for housing on reserves should come under closer scrutiny simply due to the fact that driving "through almost any reserve . . . you will see derelict houses with windows broken, doors askew, holes in the walls and roof" (108). And this from a man who admits to never having visited a Canadian reserve community!¹

Ironically, this is a useful book in the sense that it will force Aboriginal politicians and academics and lawyers working within Native Studies to shore up their arguments, allowing a more holistic and complete discourse surrounding Aboriginal rights and self-government to emerge. To his credit, Flanagan does recognize these logic gaps, although he pounces on them in a rather unforgiving manner. This book also provides those of us in Native Studies with a reveal-

ing glimpse of how the extreme right views Aboriginal issues. In my view, *First Nations? Second Thoughts* has the potential to become the Canadian Alliance Party's modern-day Indian policy from which Stockwell Day (or his predecessor) may one day be unmercifully quoting from.

As distasteful as Flanagan's position is, it is important that these ideas be made publicly available. Although his approach is old school in that he takes it upon himself to explain how the 'Native problem' in Canada can be solved, for those of us who work in Native Studies, this is an historical trend that will not soon abate and one we will regularly be faced with. On the other hand, Cairns approach is more holistic and indicative of the new course embraced by Native Studies, which takes a variety of opinions into account in the formation of his conclusions.

NOTE

1. "Assimilate Natives: Best way to end the welfare trap." *Winnipeg Sun*, 17 April 2000, p. 7