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The Distribution of Cultural Identity A Canadian Case Study

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*If these banners, hanging like silent sermons on the walls of colleges, make their message felt here and there, and convert one out of 10,000 into a Hero, and one out of 100,000 into a saviour, they well more than justify their cost and all the heart and labour put into them.*¹ (Governor General Grey)

In Canada, Canadian identity is an ongoing subject of debate. Popular culture presents us as polite, self-effacing, law-abiding... Even as we are gently mocked for our obsessive-compulsive nature regarding litter and the pronunciation of “z” we take pride in being a nation of immigrants – a mosaic rather than a melting pot. In fact, we have taken what might be described as a multiple-personality disorder and turned it into a quasi-identity. One that is underpinned by a dry humour that suggests what Canadians are *not* – not British ... not French ... not American... We like to think that we are nice, socially responsible even dutiful. But to whom? And why?

This paper focuses on a series of embroidered and appliquéd banners of St. George and the Dragon that were worked in Britain and distributed in Canada almost a century ago with the express purpose of producing an acceptable cultural identity within the rubric of Imperialism. By literally fabricating material memories the Governor General, Lord Albert Grey, set about constructing a Canadian *masculine* identity that would privilege the *British* over the *American* model. In fact we will see that the banners served as cultural models for young men, young women and finally Canada.

But first – a little background. Although Canada had been settled by the French, colonized by the British, opened its borders to the United Empire Loyalists and its vast frontier to European emigrants it was generally held (in the early years of the 20th C) that she was part of the British imperial family. Her role, at least in the eyes of British, was that of the dutiful daughter. A personal manifested in Rudyard Kipling’s poem of 1897 – *Our Lady of the Snows* – which was first published in the *London Times* as a celebration of Canadian preferential tariffs and concludes:

*The gates are mine to open
As the gates are mine to close,
And I abide in my mother's house,
Said the Lady of the Snows.*

Canadians were infuriated and debates raged in the Canadian press and in Parliament. However, it was Kipling’s assumption that we were a land of snow rather than that we were tied to Britannia’s apron strings that brought about such indignation. In fact, Canadians remained loyal to the Crown; nonetheless, the Royal Colonial Institute in

¹ Grey, quoted in Beryl Platts, “Symbols of Trust: The St. George Banners of Canada” *Country Life* (June 1982), 1694. This article was based on Robert Common’s research. See note 9 below.

London continued to worry. Would Canadians answer the call "to raise arms for Great Britain?" Would they remain distinct from their American neighbours, ignoring the siren call of independence or what was construed to be an easier lifestyle?² For hadn't the census of 1881-91 suggested 80,000 Britons passed *through* Canada choosing to settle in the United States. It was of general concern that, "... the wings of the American eagle hide the beaver out of sight."³ What to do?

The Crown's representatives – the Governors General – often assumed front-line positions. The ninth GG, Albert Henry George, 4th Earl Grey (1851-1917), had been raised in the Court of St. James, was a close friend of King Edward VII and confidant of King George V. Grey's family were aristocratic patrons of the arts and his term of office (1904-11) was marked by numerous projects intended to "enhance Canada's development within the imperial family."⁴ Perhaps the Canadian foot ball trophy, The Grey Cup, remains the most familiar of his projects – but it was only one of many. Grey's personal correspondence proves a rich source of information *vis-à-vis* Canadian cultural identity.

The most detailed description of Grey's banners appears in a letter of 13 March 1906 written to Lord Mount Stephen, President of the Canadian Pacific Railway. It is here that Grey describes what, at first glance, seems an unlikely project for the proselytizing of Empire and for the transference of cultural identity. He refers to the project as a "little scheme" of a "picturesque character," but one that will make "an impression upon the mind of the rising generation." He goes on to explain that he has already written to

*... some lady friends of mine to ask them to send me a banner of St. George which I can present to the principal training Schools and Institutes.... A banner like this, hung in the central passage ... where the students pass to and from every day of their lives for three years, cannot fail to impress itself on the character of some, giving their tastes a bent in those directions which you would desire to push them into.*⁵

At this point the Lord Grey had received two banners and writes that he had half a dozen promised, and wished for at least half a dozen more. The exact number sent from England remains unknown. To date, I have identified twelve, possibly thirteen, banners that can be tied to Grey's "little scheme." They form four distinct stylistic groups and all are all striking in appearance and scale, between 1.5 to 2 metres in height and 1 to 1.5 metres in width.⁶

² *The Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute*. London: Royal Colonial Institute, 1870.

³ Ernest Heaton "Colonial Clubs" *The Canadian Magazine of Politics, Science, Art and Literature*. 6(1895), 259-263.

⁴ Barbara J. Messamore, "The Social and Cultural Role of the Governors General, 1888-1911: British Imperialists and Canadian Nationalists," in Colin M. Coates, ed., *Imperial Canada 1867-1917* (Edinburgh: Centre of Canadian Studies, 1997), 79.

⁵ National Archives (NA), Grey Papers, Grey to Lord Mountstephen, 13 March 1906.

⁶ The banners identified with the letter "M" are from the Lady Meynell/Lady Wantage group – the mottos are in italics. The present location is given. Two at University of Toronto [Standing St. George and the Dragon, *God and the Right* (M) and The Black Prince, *Ich dien* (M)], one at University of Guelph [Mounted St. George and the Dragon (M)], one at Queen's University, Kingston, [Standing St. George and the Dragon, *Un Dieu Un Roi* (M)], two at McGill University, Montreal [Mounted St. George and the Dragon (M) and Our Lady of the Snow (M. Watts)], one at Villa Maria Convent School, Montreal [St. George and the Dragon (Princess of Wales)], one at University of King's

I came across the banners whilst tracing the influence of British traditions and design on fashionable domestic embroidery and taste in Canada.⁷ For the most part my research focused on gender and cultural identity of middle-class women. Thus, I was fascinated by the fact that Grey had chosen a medium (embroidery) closely associated with the inculcation of domesticity and femininity to proselytize the ideology of imperialism and masculinity in young men in Canada. This seemed contradictory at best.

However, Grey's agenda was well considered and reflected not only his own aristocratic background and beliefs, but those of the embroiderers and his intended audience. First was the popular understanding that *fine needlework* was rife with connotations of aristocracy, femininity, good taste, and tradition. Underpinned by benevolence and feminine grace, the very act of embroidery would carry his message to his chosen audience – the children of the plutocracy. The banners were expected to promote a sense of hierarchy, especially in a young country that, as Grey posited, had not “sufficient time to develop the artistic and idealistic qualities ... which are still lying to a great extent dormant.”⁸

Secondly, Grey's choice of *subject matter* – St. George slaying the dragon of evil – was a familiar exemplar of masculine identity and English chivalric behaviour.

*The picture of St. George on our coins suggests the idea of the knight who rides abroad redressing human wrong, thus conveying the lesson that the mission of England is to Slay the dragons of the world wherever they are to be found, and they are to be found everywhere, - and that this is the duty of every Briton. A simple red cross on the back of the banner suggests the passionate fervour of the Crusaders, the mercy and self-sacrifice of the battlefields, &c. &c. &c.*⁹

Who better, than the protector of the Christian faith and patron saint of England, to inspire successive generations of young Canadian men?

Finally, the *heraldic banner format* and the *location* within colleges and universities would appeal to Lord Grey's targeted audience.¹⁰ For, without a doubt, it was the male who was meant to play an active or even heroic role within the Empire. In Grey's view

College, Halifax [St. George (E. Davis)], one at the Glenbow Museum, Calgary [Standing St. George and the Dragon, *Un Dieu Un Roi* (M) original institution unknown]. In 1945 Grey's family sent one banner [St. George/Flowers of the Nation (M. Watts)] to the Victoria & Albert Museum and another [Standing St. George and the Dragon, *Ung Dieu Ung Roi* (M) another to University of Newcastle] Its present location remains unknown. The recent discovery of a twelfth banner, [Britannia and Canada personified (Agnes Sephton)] in the National Archives of Canada, is the focus of ongoing research. It has no provenance and comes with a single notation “the work of a lady-in-waiting to the wife of the Governor General.”

⁷ Robert Common, “The Missing Banners of Lord Grey” *Embroidery Canada* (November 1981): 5-7. I am indebted to Robert Common for sharing information he gleaned during the 1960s and 1970s. My discovery of the “missing” and unknown banners formed a chapter of my dissertation “Dutiful Daughter: Fashionable Domestic Embroidery in Canada and the British Model, 1764-1911” (Royal College of Art, London, PhD dissertation, 1998).

⁸ NA, Grey Papers, Grey to Mountstephen, 13 March 1906.

⁹ NA, Grey Papers, Grey to Lord Mountstephen, 13 March 1906.

¹⁰ The banners were finished on the reverse meaning they were to be seen from both sides; nonetheless, from their arrival in Canada all were framed, glazed, and displayed on walls – like paintings.

Canada had a pool of worthy young men in need of guidance. In his New Years Address to King Edward, in December 1906, Grey described the young nation and its inhabitants:

*The Ice and Snows of Canadian Winters, which have won for the Dominion Kipling's Appellation of the "Lady of the Snows" – a title which gave great offence to Canadians – are among Canada's greatest assets – for while the Canadian climate offers little attraction to the moral and physical weaklings who are crowding into the United States from the centre and south of Europe the hardier and more vigorous races find in the bracing atmosphere of a Canadian winter exhilaration and a tonic....*¹¹

Grey received the banners at Rideau Hall, the vice-regal residence in Ottawa, and distributed them to institutions of learning as he saw fit. With few exceptions they have remained *in situ* undisturbed and unremarked by historians. The only contemporary published description appeared at the end of Grey's term of office and celebrated the plan's success. "To Adorn our College Halls: Beautiful Banners Presented Through His Excellency the Governor General to the People of Canada." It was written by L. A. M. Lovekin and included photographs by Ottawa's society photographer W. J. Topley.¹²

In hindsight there are telling omissions and contradictions in this article. For instance we find broad references to *exemplary* royal embroiderers – Her Majesty the Queen and H. R. H. the Princess of Wales – yet there is no reference to the only banner the Princess acknowledged. There is certainly no mention of a banner worked by professional embroiderer Edith Davis that had been displayed at the Arts and Crafts exhibition of 1908 in London and been presented by Grey to King's College in Nova Scotia. Two banners by Mrs. Watts were admired – as much for their being worked by the wife of Imperialist and artist Sir George Frederick Watts as for their own sake. Photographs of several of the banners by Grey's aunt, Lady Wantage and his cousin, Lady Mary Meynell are discussed, yet the institutions that received them never knew the maker's identities; further, his cousin would, in 1935, write to the *Churchman* regarding the whereabouts of the banners she and her family had sent to Canada.

The *six* Meynell banners form the largest stylistic group and given Grey's agenda were perhaps the most successful. These banners vigorously supported Grey's scheme and there are at least six variations of St. George *the soldier* defeating the dragon. In every case St. George is portrayed in full armour with plumed helmet and sword or spear. He is the active masculine ideal, a conquering hero, on horseback in the process of slaying the dragon or standing astride his defeated enemy. These banners feature narrative central panels that present the Neo-Gothic protagonist in silhouette against a solid background. A border of Tudor roses worked in gold thread frames the images.

Each banner incorporates a variety of Warner silks, heavy fringes, jewels, and personable stylized dragons.¹³ Despite the common formal elements (the result of a single designer)

¹¹ NA, Grey Papers, Grey to King Edward, 31 December 1906.

¹² L.A.M. Lovekin, "To Adorn our College Halls: Beautiful Banners Presented Through His Excellency the Governor General to the People of Canada." *Canadian Life and Resources* (c. 1910): 12-13. This article was found in a scrapbook in the Grey file at the NA.

¹³ Linda Parry of the V & A identified a number of the fabrics used in the banners as those produced by Warner & Sons Ltd. The company was associated with Mary of Teck and active in producing silk fabrics for the Royal weddings.

there are variations in fabrics, technique and painted details that suggest a variety of embroiderers worked on these banners. There are no signatures – this was, after all, an era when “ladies” did not work for recognition or recompense!

Grey described the first banner from his aunt as,

*A really beautiful reproduction of St. George and the Dragon ... clothed in a most artistic arrangement of silks and satins all ingeniously dove-tailed pieces of brocade ... [with] a rich border of stamped velvet of a darker crimson, lightened by the gold embroidered roses of England ... on the reverse is the cross of St. George.*¹⁴

In order to meet his agenda Grey realized that it was essential that the *banners* and the *makers* were seen to be exemplary. For, it would be through *royal exemplar* that the inculcation of British values and ideals would be ensured. The Governor General therefore found it expedient to separate the banners from any one individual's identity. As the official representative of the Crown, he was unchallenged in this practice, and the recipients readily accepted the implication that the embroiderer was herself royal, or at the very least the wife of a very great man! The archival evidence in all of the home institutions is a model of ambiguity.

Grey's correspondence suggests that *he* instigated the project. In fact, it is likely that he was inspired by an embroidered banner worked by the Princess of Wales to commemorate a visit she and her husband, the future King George V, made to Montreal in 1901. Given Grey's close relationship with the royal family he would have seen this work in its early stages even before he took office in Canada. This is an embroidered St. George and is the *only* banner linked to a royal embroiderer. Grey presented it to Montreal's Villa Maria convent school in 1908 on her behalf, yet there was no public mention of this banner in the Lovekin article!

The reason for this oversight is straightforward given Grey's agenda regarding masculine identity. Whereas Grey had free reign in distributing the other banners, this was a site-specific banner. Princess Mary had made the banner for Villa Maria, a bilingual convent school for young ladies, and this was certainly not Grey's intended audience. In his address he advised the young women that the *spirited representation* was to serve, in a sense, as inspiration by proxy: for “it is the duty of every good woman to help, with her prayers, her sympathy and support, the chivalrous knights whose worthy ambition is to kill the dragon of evil.”¹⁵ Like Castiglione in the sixteenth century Grey's view of woman's role was informed by what man was not (*The Book of the Courtier* 1528).

While Grey had no difficulty distributing the majority of the banners to Canadian institutions there were two banners by the British artist Mary Seton Watts (1849-1938) that caused him serious qualms. These banners simply did not fit with his vision of Empire. Grey's was a patriarchal and militaristic viewpoint; one that promoted an aggressive combative role that saw St. George in “mortal combat with the monster of

¹⁴ NA, Grey Papers, Grey to Lord Mountstephen, 13 March 1906.

¹⁵ The contents of the address was transcribed and is attached to frame of the Villa Maria banner.

evil.”¹⁶ Watts had sent pastel doves of peace and symbols of love, faith and hope. Her view of Empire was subtle, spiritual and feminine – domestic. In her journal she wrote that she wanted the banners to be “a full rounded inspiration ... [combining] the crown and the dove!”¹⁷

Upon first seeing Watts’ St. George in 1906 Grey enthused over its artistic significance and wrote:

*Sir George is represented by a young angel knight with a strong tower coronet, resting upon a wreath of laurels – a face which might have been painted by Burne-Jones; shoulders and head standing out from a background of strong, supporting and most graceful wings...tapering down to the feet in the shape of a shield...on the back of the banner...is the simple red cross of St. George.*¹⁸

Yet there were problems when the Lovekin article was published, for the banner had undergone a transformation, at least in print. St. George was now identified as female and the banner renamed *The Spirit of the Flowers of the Nations*. Lovekin describes her as:

*A Messenge the sap of a Canadian spring is rising within her....Her breastplate is the burning heart, for she would conquer Love... She has made a garland of the flowers of the nations, as they bloom together in the Dominion of Canada, ..., it may be that she wishes Canada to teach the nations that, bound by a common cause, they may be strong to bring Unity, Justice and Freedom over the two hemispheres. If so, the Leaf of the Maple will be like the Leaves of the Tree of Life and shall be “for the healing of all the nations.”*¹⁹

For all intents and purposes this banner simply disappeared from sight with one British author (1982) suggesting that Canada had wantonly misplaced these *symbols of trust*. Mortified by the reprimand (a Canadian response I’m sure), I was delighted to discover that Canada had not been errant; rather, Lord Grey had chosen not to part with the banner and had taken it back to Britain when he left Canada. After his death the banner was presented to the V&A museum where, despite the red cross, it remains in storage as *Flowers of the Nation*.

The second Watts’ banner was also problematic for Grey although it brings my research full circle. Here we see the personification of Canada as *Our Lady of the Snows*. Not Grey’s *righter of wrongs*, but a representation of the young country growing up to meet *her* destiny – an unlikely model for young men! The dilemma of what to do with the bejewelled lady in frosted silk and velvet was resolved when Grey chose to consider the role of middle-class women in Canada. Renaming it *The Queen’s Banner* (despite the fact that Queen Alexandria played no part in its creation) and presenting it to McGill’s Royal Victoria College was an inspired choice for this was Canada’s first women’s college. Here was the manifestation of Canada as she appeared in Rudyard Kipling’s poem – the dutiful daughter.

¹⁶ Grey, quoted in Beryl Platts, “Symbols of Trust: The St. George Banners of Canada,” *Country Life* (June 1982): 1694.

¹⁷ The Watts Gallery, Compton, Surrey, Mary Seton Watts, unpublished journal, 29 July 1906.

¹⁸ NA., Grey to Lord Mountstephen, 13 March 1906.

¹⁹ Lovekin, *Canadian Life and Resources* (c. 1910): 13.

When Grey returned to England in 1911 his *little scheme* was in place – he had called upon well-placed friends and relations to create inspirational banners to promote a sense of hierarchy and loyalty to Britain – in effect consolidating the familial relationship. Was the scheme successful? Were young Canadians inspired? Do the banners provide insights into the construction of a Canadian identity?

Given the reception of the banners, one would have to answer yes. Prior to the Great War these banners served as inspirational calls to Empire and duty. When Britain went to war in 1914 many Canadian university departments were forced to shut down as students and professors answered the call. In the aftermath of war the banners became mute testaments to the young men who had left the halls of learning to fight Grey's *Dragon of Evil* and who did not return. Although import of these banners has waxed and waned in the intervening years they *have* remained undisturbed for almost a century. This continued presence speaks volumes about the work-a-day import of the crown in Canada and also the role fine embroidery plays in the public consciousness. This is even more remarkable given that the banners represent an aesthetic (feminine, domestic and Victorian) that has been maligned by modernists throughout much of the twentieth-century.

While I will conclude here, I must mention that this research is ongoing and has been given a new direction by a recently located banner that has a tentative Canadian provenance. Despite being identified as an “anonymous tapestry” by the National Archives, this *embroidered* banner is signed and dated “Agnes Sephton 1907” and meets Grey's brief – with a twist. Here, St. George appears, but as a secondary figure – the focus is on the relationship between Britain and Canada. The symbolism is obvious: on the right beneath the English oak is the personification of Britannia, her shield emblazoned with St. George battling the Dragon; on the left, under the maple and sheltered by Britannia's arm, we see a youthful Canada – proffering gifts from the land and the sea.

Even as the St. George banners were conceived as a catalyst for masculine identity – one that would favour the British over the American model – I would argue that in these works it was a Canadian cultural identity that was at issue. This final banner is a blueprint for this identity. Canada as envisioned by the British public and portrayed by Rudyard Kipling – the dutiful daughter – wanting to be liked, ready to lend a hand – the peacekeeper in the global village.

See photographs below.



Fig. 1 (left) Lady of the Snows. Mary Tytler Watts Embroidered and appliquéd banner. c. 1907. Photograph Topley Studio, Ottawa, Ontario. National Archives of Canada.

Fig. 2 (right) St. George and the Dragon. Lady Meynell and Lady Wantage. Embroidered and appliquéd banners c. 1907. Photograph Topley Studio, Ottawa, Ontario. National Archives of Canada.



Fig. 3 Ballroom of Rideau Hall with St. George banners. c.1908. Topley Studio, Ottawa, Ontario. National Archives of Canada.