

Whither you know who

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INTENT FOR A NATION

By Michael Byers

Douglas & McIntyre,

248 pages, \$32.95

CANADA'S YOUNG ACTIVISTS: A Generation Stands Up for Change

Edited by Severn Cullis-Suzuki, Kris Frederickson, Ahmed Kayssi and Cynthia MacKenzie, with Daniel Aldana Cohen

GreyStone, 226 pages, \$21.95

GREAT QUESTIONS OF CANADA

Revised Edition

Edited by Rudyard Griffiths

Key Porter, 214 pages, \$22.95

These three books all delve into the values and aspirations of Canadians as revealed by our history and media, and, in the case of *Canada's Young Activists*, the dreams and adventures of our kids.

Intent for a Nation, Michael Byers's engaging polemic - and this reviewer is not often inclined to attach the word "engaging" to polemics - is a passionate and cheerful call for international action, based on a diligent reading of our values and our potential by an academic who holds the chair in global politics and international law at the University of British Columbia.

Canada's Young Activists is a collection of very personal accounts of their adventures by a couple of dozen Canadians in their teens and twenties, from an impressive range of ethnic backgrounds, young men and women who have been getting out and actually doing things: founding a summer camp for poor kids, circumnavigating the globe without burning fossil fuels, tackling the cruelties of child labour.

And *Great Questions of Canada*: paired argument/counter-arguments from 16 mostly well-known writers, comprehensively surveying the values, history and ideas that seem to be driving Canada now, both uniting and dividing us. It was assembled by Rudyard Griffiths, as a project of his foundation, the Dominion Institute, and begins with a wide-ranging discussion between Jack Granatstein and Michael Ignatieff on the way Canadian historians have treated the story of our country.

The book takes off from the premise that our civic culture has tended on the whole to deal not with concepts and principles, but to focus on the effectiveness of social programs and institutions: the protection of rights, the furnishing of health and economic services, and our international diplomatic activities, especially in the promotion of peace and prosperity world-wide.

Griffiths, in his foreword, declares that ideas drove the founding of the country, and argues that it's time we got back to a serious review of what the underlying concepts are, as a way of cleaning up the messy and confused face official Canada often presents to its citizens and to the world. He claims that growing numbers of Canadians are distrustful of politics, that trust in our institutions, which has until recently been an important ground upon which national consensus has thrived, is eroding and needs to be addressed. This is the thrust of the invitation he extended to his 16 writers, who took it up with focus and passion.

For historian Jack Granatstein, the answer is, not surprisingly, history. If we don't know where we came from how can we know where we should be going? But we don't teach much history in our schools any more. Four of our provinces do not even offer compulsory Canadian history courses in their high schools. The values that engendered our institutions and attitudes, and the story of how we came to them, should be "force-fed," Granatstein writes, because if our young people don't know what struggles and conflicts they resolved, they'll be ill equipped to contribute to the ongoing process.

Replying to Granatstein in Part One of this book, which energetically sets the tone and to a large extent lays out the parameters, Michael Ignatieff argues that a big problem with the history of our national origins is that it leaves out most of the people who live here now. And even for the so-called founding nations, it is not, he declares, something we can really share.

"It would be nice if one day Québécois people would admit that the conquest didn't turn out too badly for them; that the British conquerors actually safeguarded their religion and laws. ... And it would be nice if the English admitted that the French are not some inconvenient historical anomaly ... but that their presence and the unending argument that

goes with it has defined us both and made us different, and actually helps guarantee our joint survival as a distinct people."

(It seems to me that since the Quiet Revolution got under way in Quebec in the 1960s, we had pretty well arrived at that set of attitudes. However.) Ignatieff goes on: "I don't think history is - or should be - just a lesson in patriotism. It should be a lesson in truth. And the truth is both painful and many-sided. What kind of history is it that would exclude the execution of Riel, the War Measures Act, the bitterly divisive debates about conscription, the residential schools for aboriginal children?"

No argument. But again it seems to me that the past few decades have seen us very passionately telling those troubling stories, and lessons in patriotism are certainly not what Granatstein means about the history of the building of our values.

I wrote in these pages, seven years ago (ironically, in response to a piece by Rudyard Griffiths, whom I thought then to be overly anxious about the issue), that the success of the History Television specialty channels in both Canada and the United States shows that there is a substantial popular curiosity about our history. Also seven years ago, I reviewed in these pages Myrna Kostash's *The Next Canada*, in which she recounted her extensive explorations among Canadian young people, finding there a huge appetite for and engagement with the history of our country.

But the schools are letting us down here, and these excerpts give a taste of the vigour of the arguments in Griffiths's collection, arguments that spin out and exfoliate and extend into new territory throughout the book. Included are some strong and argumentative passages by Ovid Mercredi, Jean Teillet, Guy Laforest and Tom Flanagan about our Indians, public and media attitudes toward them, and the history and seldom very happy profile of national policy thereupon.

Teillet - a great grand-niece of Louis Riel - declares that Canadians are willfully ignorant of the cultural vigour of Canadian Indians, and here again I found myself saying, I thought we were making headway in that regard: Look at the Bill Reid sculpture on the porch of the Canadian Embassy in Washington, at Mohawk chief Roberta Jamieson's pioneering tenure as Ontario's first Ombudsman, at the passionate films of Alanis Obomsawin (vigorously supported by the NFB), the brilliant museum in Vancouver - all pretty new stuff and representing a substantial transformation in national attitudes. Huge ground still to be covered, yes, but polemicists like the already very effective Teillet would strengthen their positions by recounting the achievements as well as the challenges.

In a way, the overall political thrust of this absorbing read - well, absorbing to anyone who is at once passionate about what we have achieved socially and politically, and what we risk - is exemplified by a few short paragraphs from Guy Laforest (ex-president of Action démocratique du Québec and head of political science at Laval University), in which he proposes substantial reforms to the federal government, where too much power is concentrated in the hands of the prime minister and cabinet, who are not sufficiently

subject to legislative control, changing the way we appoint the Supreme Court, and giving the provinces a stronger voice in federal-provincial relations: "Our political system does not measure up to our fame abroad."

Michael Byers's title, *Intent for a Nation*, is a deliberate echo of George Grant's famous 1965 work, *Lament for a Nation*, the pessimism of which Byers disputes as he examines a broad range of international disputes, from genocide in Darfur to anti-ballistic-missile defence. Byers, who holds the Canada Research Chair in Global Politics and International Law at the University of British Columbia, argues that we are more eminent in the minds of world leaders than we acknowledge to ourselves, and could, because of the general success of our own policies, both internal and external, play a much more vigorous and productive role in reducing international conflict.

Unlike the Griffiths collection, this is a book aimed not so much at the general reader as at those who are already aroused about this country's international activities. Such readers will find it closely argued, convincing, challenging, sometimes even exhilarating, and part of Byers's purpose in writing it is to enlarge that population.

Young Activists: A Generation Stands Up for Change covers a lot of ground, geographically and ethnically. It is 25 Canadians, in their twenties and thirties as they write, recounting how circumstances or a sudden burst of conviction and clarity sent them off in their teens to do something to help the world. A fibromyalgia sufferer who takes up dancing to defy her pain becomes a professional choreographer, and somehow finds the focus and energy to start a foundation committed to getting young people involved in traditional democratic politics. An adolescent boy who set out to save from extinction the rare white Spirit Bear in British Columbia helps get the necessary environmental legislation passed, and becomes one of Time Magazine's Heroes of the Planet. A couple of young men from Engineers Without Borders decide that digging wells for poor African villagers is of less value than teaching them the basic engineering skills required to find, utilize and protect their own water supplies. There are also a co-founder of Journalists for Human Rights, and an Inuit woman with a Jamaican father who starts a foundation in Iqaluit.

If this all sounds just a little too goody-goody ... well, on the surface, it is. Yet the stories themselves are for the most part provocative and sometimes even well written. They cumulatively make a declaration of hope in the social and political potential of eccentric human initiative that is refreshing at a time when we are exposed every day to such a bath of collective worrying about the climate, the failure of politics and the growth of violent crime. And in their own fresh and eccentric way, they have a great deal to do, in the end, with the historical values and traditions that we found Jack Granatstein and Michael Ignatieff arguing about at the beginning.

These are three very different books that, in fact, have a great deal to do with one other.

Contributing reviewer Patrick Watson's most recent books are This Hour Has Seven Decades, a memoir, and Wittgenstein and the Goshawk: A Fable.

