

The Prime Minister as Fetish? Ironic Nationalism, the News Media, and the Canadian Legends Figurines

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Numéro 42, 2010

Canadian Issues: childhoods, states, nationalisms
Enjeux canadiens : enfances, États, nationalismes

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1002178ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1002178ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Conseil international d'études canadiennes

ISSN

1180-3991 (imprimé)

1923-5291 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Rothenburger, S. (2010). The Prime Minister as Fetish? Ironic Nationalism, the News Media, and the Canadian Legends Figurines. *International Journal of Canadian Studies / Revue internationale d'études canadiennes*, (42), 207–224.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1002178ar>

Résumé de l'article

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*The Prime Minister as Fetish?
Ironic Nationalism, the News Media,
and the Canadian Legends Figurines¹*

Abstract

This article explores the public reception of the Canadian Legends, a series of toys based on Canadian historical figures. For some purchasers, the toys appear to act as nationalist fetishes, resolving a desire for a stable national identity in the face of numerous challenges to such an identity. Many media commentators, on the other hand, take an ironic stance toward the toys. This stance, while seeming to undercut the toymakers' stated purpose of promoting nationalism, is actually part of a greater pattern in Canadian culture that uses irony to promote a more nuanced nationalism while upholding racial and gendered hierarchies within the nation.

Résumé

Cet article examine l'accueil que le public a réservé aux figurines de personnages historiques canadiens lancées sur le marché par l'entreprise Canadian Legends. Certains acheteurs semblent considérer ces figurines comme des objets fétiches nationaux qui répondent à un désir d'identité nationale stable face aux nombreuses difficultés à surmonter pour faciliter l'émergence d'une telle identité. D'autre part, dans les médias, bon nombre de commentateurs adoptent une attitude ironique à l'égard de ces figurines. Bien qu'elle semble saper la prétention des fabricants de ces figurines qui leur attribuent une fonction de promotion du nationalisme, cette attitude s'inscrit en réalité dans une plus grande tendance observée dans la culture canadienne, tendance qui consiste à utiliser l'ironie pour promouvoir un nationalisme plus nuancé tout en soutenant une hiérarchie des races et des sexes au sein de la nation.

In 2003, a Montreal-based company named Nafekh Technologies released a six-inch figurine of Canadian Prime Minister John A. Macdonald. The toy, which includes spectacles and a stack of books for Macdonald, as well as a pamphlet on his life, was the first in a series of toys entitled *Canadian Legends*, modeled on figures from Canada's history. The figurine sold well, selling out at Canadian Wal-marts the first month it was in stock (Evans M2), and has been followed in subsequent years by two more figurines: Wilfrid Laurier and Isaac Brock.

While the figurines were created as educational toys for children, the company's co-owner, Sonia Nafekh, says that many adults buy the toys for themselves, and purchasers include lawyers, museum curators, military

personnel, and college and university professors (Nafekh, "Questions"). The Macdonald toy also sold very well at the 2003 Liberal Convention ("Men of Action" A26), and attracted a great deal of media attention: their advent was reported in several major newspapers across the country—*The Globe and Mail*, *The National Post*, *The Toronto Sun*, among others—and mentioned on CBC television and radio programs. Nafekh told one reporter after the release of the Macdonald doll that the company was "being bombarded with interview requests" from the media (Crosbie, "Sir John" 3).

The amount of media attention the toys received, and their overtly nationalist purpose, at first might appear somewhat odd in a cultural climate that, on many levels, is often suspicious of or at least ambivalent about nationalism. The toys' creator, Andrew Nafekh, told the *Toronto Star*, "It's important for Canadians to be more patriotic because we are fortunate to live in a beautiful and peaceful country. [...] This toy is an expression of that sentiment and patriotism" (qtd. Hutsul E10). However, according to numerous critics in various fields, Canadians have often hesitated to proclaim a stable national identity that might inspire such pride. In *The Canadian Postmodern*, Linda Hutcheon argues that Canada "is a vast nation with little sense of firm geographical centre or ethnic unity: the multicultural mosaic is no melting pot. In fact, we might be said to have quite a firm suspicion of centralizing tendencies, be they national, political, or social" (3). Such a tendency has only been compounded in the last twenty or thirty years by post-modernist and post-colonialist art and scholarship in Canada that interrogates nationalism. Hutcheon's own study demonstrates how various authors have undermined notions of the "great" narratives or persons of history, and written instead about those who have been frequently marginalized by them. Public debates, too, about multiculturalism and its status as part of Canada's identity, particularly in the 1990s, and subsequent discussions about globalization, in some cases have intensified a suspicion of unified narratives of Canadian identity and its history. Texts such as Smaro Kamboureli's *Scandalous Bodies* and Eva Mackey's *The House of Difference*, for example, put forth the idea that even "multiculturalism" itself is a master narrative worthy of suspicion.

Nor has such skepticism been prominent only in academic discourse. Criticisms and an awareness of the fissures in the Canadian nation go back to widely-read pre-confederation texts such as Susanna Moodie's *Roughing it in the Bush* (1852) and Thomas Chandler Haliburton's *The Clockmaker* (1835), and continue in various aspects of contemporary popular culture: the *Ginger Snaps* horror movie trilogy (2000–04) uses werewolfism to interrogate Canadian suburbia and ideals of "peace, order, and good government"; Chester Brown's graphic novel, *Louis Riel* (2007), destabilizes the heroism of both its protagonist and Canada's first prime minister; television shows such as *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* and *The Rick Mercer Report* are well-known

for their political and social satire; and, of course, the media commentary I will discuss in this article also often evinces an ironic attitude toward nation.

If one is aware of the numerous examples of such skepticism about the possibility of a solid and unified Canadian identity, the at-times enthusiastic response to three toys intended to promote nationalism seems a bit anomalous. As I will demonstrate, however, the reception of *Canadian Legends* is worthy of attention because it is part of a larger pattern in English-Canadian culture and its news media. Despite an apparent skepticism about nationalism in many aspects of Canadian culture, the *Canadian Legends* toys demonstrate a strong strain of nationalism in the country. The toys, in fact, might act as fetishes for some buyers and commentators, as objects that represent an irresolvable conflict: a recognition of instabilities and conflicts in Canadian culture alongside a perhaps unspoken desire to believe in the possibility of a stable, monolithic Canadian identity, a nostalgia for that which has never been. Rather than being overt and direct, though, such nationalism is often more subtle, employing irony to great effect. In fact, some Canadians are most nationalistic when they appear to be most critical of such sentiment. While I am not the only critic to point to this irony, what is of particular significance to me is the potential conservatism of the ironic mode in the news media, its danger as an expression of nationalism that helps uphold hierarchies of race and gender within Canada. In exploring these various issues, I will look at the toys themselves, their creators and purchasers, and then the media's predominantly ironic reaction to the toys.

As I've already observed, the creator's purpose for the toys is overtly nationalistic, and some of the news coverage points to this as the appeal for potential buyers: one of the consumers interviewed on the CBC radio program *The Current* thinks the dolls help combat the myth that Canadian history isn't interesting ("Home-grown"); Peter Evans, in his article on the Isaac Brock doll, emphasizes the idea of Brock as a Canadian hero, describing how he held off an American invasion when his troops were outnumbered two to one (M2); and several articles highlight the Nafekhs' desire to celebrate Canadian history (Fitzpatrick 14; Crosbie "Father" 1; Wattie A1; "Toys Get Canadian Spin"). This is not to say that all possible consumers would have the same reaction to the toys, or use them for the same purpose, but the public discourse about them points to the fact that one of their most common functions might be as embodiments of a desire for a particular Canadian identity and a strong narrative of Canadian history that might establish this, despite a cultural climate that often criticizes such things, and despite a legacy of uncertainty about Canadian unity. What I would like to argue is that these figurines might become the fetish objects through which such a conflict can be manipulated.

Freud defines the fetish as coming into being when the child realizes his mother does not have a penis; the fetish replaces that which is missing.

Fetishism, though, is not merely a matter of the child continuing to believe in the mother's penis: "He has retained that belief, but he has also given it up. In the conflict between the weight of the unwelcome perception and the force of his counter-wish, a compromise has been reached" (Freud 353). The fetish is a reminder of castration but also a "triumph" over the threat of it (353), and, as such, can be treated with both hostility and affection (356–57). This ambivalence in fetishism is key to Anne McClintock's revising of Freud in *Imperial Leather*. She argues for an understanding of the fetish beyond a phallic significance, viewing the fetish more broadly "as the displacement onto an object (or person) of contradictions that the individual cannot resolve at a personal level" (184). She adds, "By displacing power onto the fetish, then manipulating the fetish, the individual gains symbolic control over what might otherwise be terrifying ambiguities" (184).

McClintock's theory takes on particular relevance to the *Canadian Legends* in that it reflects what other theorists have written about the fetishistic function of toys. Melanie Klein theorized early in the twentieth century that play with toys was a means by which very young children could explore and express inner conflicts (23–64), and, much later, Brian Sutton-Smith pointed out that one of the characteristics of "play" is that it allows an individual to express in a harmless way those motivations that one "prefer[s] not to express in the light of day (anger, sex, murder, fear, etc.)" (140). This allows the individual a feeling of mastery over such behaviours and feelings (140). The example Sutton-Smith uses, of Hamlet's "play" through theatrics to explore his own conflicts and suspicions, points to the fact that adults might be as prone to use play and toys this way as children. Sutton-Smith even suggests, again in relation to adults, "Perhaps toys in general are a metaphoric fetish against impotence" (219). I would suggest that this function of toys is intensified when the toys are miniatures, as the *Canadian Legends* are. Both Susan Stewart (124–25) and Steven Millhauser (130–31) have argued that, for adults and children alike, part of the appeal of the miniature is that it gives one a sense of power over the tiny objects in one's gaze. Thus, the fact that the figurines are miniatures heightens the sense of control over conflicting impulses that toys often evoke.

As I've suggested, such control might be appealing in the case of the *Canadian Legends* toys in that it can help soothe any anxieties about the conflict between a desire for nationalism and an awareness of either its lack or a sense that such a desire is not socially acceptable or is naïve. Such a conflict can be viewed within the context of Canada's colonial history. McClintock places the fetish in an imperial/colonial context, pointing out that one of the early uses of the term was to refer to objects used in what the British deemed the "primitive" religions of the colonies. The British, of course, had their own fetishes, as when the map of the world itself became a fetish, giving colonizers a sense of mastery over the globe and accommodating lands they

perceived as anachronistic under the sign of imperial progress and modernity (188–89). McClintock also views nationalism itself as belonging to “the realm of fetishism,” and considers the ways various kinds of visual symbols have acted as fetish objects to help create a sense of nation (374–75). Likewise, I see the *Canadian Legends* toys, reducing the nation to easily manipulable figurines, as allowing for a sense of mastery over Canada’s contradictions and disunities in order to hold up a rather hegemonic version of national identity, based in Canada’s colonial past. It is key that two of the figures, Macdonald and Brock, were prominent in the nineteenth century, the height of British colonialism in Canada but also a time when that system was under threat during events such as the War of 1812, the Rebellions of 1837–38, the Fenian raids, and the Northwest Rebellions. The third figure, Laurier, spans in his lifetime the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a time of great debate about Canada’s sense of identity and its role in the British Empire, especially during and following the First World War. In a way, these three figurines allow for a re-colonizing of Canadian space, celebrating various supposed “triumphs” of European-Canadians.

Eva Mackey argues that, throughout Canada’s history, the idea of threats to the nation, from both outside forces such as the power of the United States and internal forces such as immigrants with distinct cultures, has been frequently constructed in order to call for and maintain a hegemonic order. Thus, “national identity is not so much in a constant state of crisis, but that the reproduction of ‘crisis’ allows the nation to be a site of a constantly regulated politics of identity” (13). Such a process is perhaps at work in the *Canadian Legends* figurines. Each of the historical figures is a white male, and each is portrayed as maintaining the country’s “unity”—as white and English—in the face of resistance. Sonia Nafekh says the company began with Macdonald because they thought “the best place to start would be with the person who put this country together” (Wright). This is a rather softened summary of Macdonald’s governance, especially given his treatment of the Métis. As well, the educational booklet that comes with the Brock doll explains, in Brock’s “own” voice, “Today, many Canadians call me a hero because I helped to keep this country together [...] during the war of 1812” (Nafekh, “Brock” 1), again emphasizing Anglo-Canadian triumph, this time over American invaders. Even Laurier, as a francophone, preached co-operation between the French and English rather than Quebecois independence. Such toys indirectly point to a fraught and violent national history, but also act, to use Homi Bhabha’s term for the fetish, as “suture” (115), reassurance that such conflicts can be “resolved,” that the country can be coherent, can have a clear national history and identity because one can name and idolize these men, that is constructed *as* one names and idolizes these men. The toys, manipulated, posed and displayed, perhaps on various kinds of office desks

across the country, might create a sense of “mastery” over historical fissures in Canadian unity, and in effect re/colonize the country.

This desire to re-enact and re-enforce colonization is emphasized by the advertising slogan of the toys: “Canada: it’s worth collecting.” The nation becomes, through the figurines, something that can be gathered up and held together. It is an appropriate metaphor, for, as Stewart argues, one of the characteristics of collections is that they bring together in one place objects, often miniatures, that might be connected, but are never exactly the same (155). The description parallels the colonial endeavour of “gathering up” different peoples and lands under the same empire, but such an idea also continues to be relevant in the “post”-colonial era, given ongoing discussions about the nation’s cultural diversity and immigration policies. The present-day notion of “Canada” in the rhetoric of multiculturalism, for example, is supposed to serve the same function as the collection. Kamboureli’s description of multiculturalism is relevant here:

The Multiculturalism Act (also known as Bill C-93) recognizes the cultural diversity that constitutes Canada, but it does so by practicing a sedative politics, a politics that attempts to recognize ethnic differences, but only in a contained fashion, in order to manage them. (82)

Mackey makes a similar point, arguing that the point of multiculturalism is to subjugate minority cultures to the service of nationalism, “celebrating” the “flavour” such cultures bring to Canada, without granting such groups real political power (66). The toys’ slogan seems to evoke this idea of a multiculturalist Canada, this collecting of various cultures and differences in one place in order to develop a sense of control over them. Such control is necessary for, as Kamboureli notes, minority Canadians are often portrayed in the media as dangerous and defiant of the national order, threats to a dominant, Eurocentric culture in Canada (84–86). If, as Stewart argues, “One cannot know everything about the world, but one can at least approach closed knowledge through the collection” (161), such multiculturalist knowledge of Others can create a sense of control over this supposed threat. Significantly, however, the *Canadian Legends* figurines are not representative of a variety of ethnic groups—the toys’ enterprise is not about collecting Others in order to contain them, but *excluding* Others in order to contain them. The Other is left out of the nation’s history, or, perhaps, presumed to be represented by the white males as part of a universalizing “Canadian” discourse. Difference is ignored, satisfying “the collector’s need for control and possession” (Stewart 161).

At the same time, the idea of the historical men represented by the toys bringing about unity points to the *disunity* of the nation, the “crisis” that Mackey refers to—unity is a process, a construction, rather than a given of the nation. It is this lack that gives the figurines their fetishistic power, and nationalism its continuing appeal in Canada as a process that must be

always anxiously created, enacted, and repeated. Perhaps, then, the *Canadian Legends* figurines, as fetishes, encourage continued acts of unifying, continuing colonization of the country, in the present generations, as the historical personages are considered, according to Nafekh's website, "inspirational role models for children and collectors." Like these figures, contemporary Canadians are encouraged "to keep this country together" in the face of internal and external threats.

The conflicts discussed above are confronted in a different way, though, by other commentators. Despite some of the examples already noted, irony appears to be the dominant mode of reporting on these toys, and the commentators play on the conflict described above—between a desire for nationalism and a fear that such desire is not acceptable or fulfillable—to create humour and, seemingly, undermine the desire for nationalism. The media's reception of the *Canadian Legends* toys points to the Canadian nation as an uncertain entity, and apparently targets the simplistic nationalism the figures represent.

My definition of irony here draws on Hutcheon's definition that it involves "the said *and* the unsaid working together to create something new"; that is, the evocation of multiple meanings at the same time (*Irony's Edge* 61). Much of the media coverage of the figurines appears to be endorsing the toys (the said) while also suggesting, through hyperbole or the evocation of contrast between the "ideal" of nationalism and the personal flaws of these historical men, the tenuousness of Canadian national identity (the unsaid). While, as I have argued above, such tenuousness is already implicit in the toys, and, indeed, might be part of their appeal for consumers, the news commentators I discuss below seem to deliberately evoke and stress this tenuousness.

For example, Chris Wattie's article in the *National Post* juxtaposes Sonia Nafekh's comment that the company is "hoping to educate young people about [...] the Canadians who had a significant impact on building our country" with Wattie's own de-valORIZING headline on the Macdonald figure: "John A. Doll Is Anatomically Correct (It Has No Liver)" (A1). An article in the Montreal *Gazette* uses the same doll to target corrupt or inept federal politicians: "the best in such a line would be Paul Martin. Push the button and he does everything everybody wants" ("Men of Action" A26). Even the title of the latter article, "Men of Action," ironically implies, when read in conjunction with such comments, that most politicians, while they may "act," do so ineffectively. These kinds of commentaries indirectly critique the idea of a heroic Canadian past and present, with the evoking of contemporary politics acting as a corollary, rather than a contrast, to historical politics.

Part of the sarcasm in the news commentary derives from the fact that action figures are more often modeled on fictional superheroes rather than

historical figures, but it's difficult to imagine the same irony greeting a Paul Revere or George Washington doll in the US, not because Canadian history is or is not less heroic than that of the US, but because many Canadians *believe* it to be less so. That is, the writers, at least on the surface, adhere to the construction of Canada as lacking heroes and national greatness. In fact, these commentaries continue what Beverly Rasporich has identified as a long tradition of Canadians satirizing important public figures; she notes, for example, 1870s cartoons that targeted Macdonald's drinking (84–85), the same characteristic frequently joked about in the *Canadian Legends* coverage. As well, at times in the media coverage, the figurines are directly contrasted with other dolls, setting up a binary between a Canadian ethos and that of the US, as when Evans comments, "karate-chopping GI Joe moves might be a bit outside Gen. Brock's usual repertoire," or when another writer compares the figurines to various American action toys:

Sir John A. is now an action figure, joining such other luminary castings in plastic as GI Joe, Darth Vader, and Spiderman. Six inches tall, complete with body-hugging five-button vest and a pair of lethal-looking pincenez, this is one head of government you won't want to mess with. ("Coming Soon" 6)

Macdonald's rather mundane accessories and persona are implicitly contrasted with the more obviously powerful and legendary American figures, for humorous effect.

What I am identifying as the ironic reactions to the toys may still function fetishistically, however, although differently from the way the toys are fetishized in a more overtly nationalistic context by their purchasers. Hutcheon has frequently iterated that irony can be a tool for subversion, a mode of interrogating and criticizing the dominant discourse from inside it. In *Irony's Edge*, however, she cautions, "it is too easy to forget the dangers [of irony] in the face of the valorization of irony's subversive potential" (196). I see the ironic responses to the *Canadian Legends* toys as "dangerous" in that they conservatively critique the nation in a way that might forestall or contain more radical critiques. As a mode of address that gives the impression of detachment, irony might seem to stand in contrast to the passionate impulses of nationalism. However, in this case the news commentators' "detached" irony is actually very invested in managing some of the same conflicts about nation addressed above. James S. Ettema and Theodore L. Glasser argue that irony in journalism sets up a tone of sophistication and realism intended to draw the reader in, but such journalism is often un-ironic about its own processes (8), and this seems to be the case here.

In fact, the commentaries perhaps privilege a particular kind of Canadian nationalism as more "sophisticated" than other kinds of nationalism. In his

article “Namelessness, Irony, and National Character in Contemporary Canadian Criticism and the Critical Tradition,” Adam Carter argues that, historically, irony about one’s own nation has been used to place it “above” other cultures. He notices a pattern in Western literature going back to the late eighteenth century, in which the writer’s own nation is often portrayed as complex and sophisticated, un-nameable even, while other nations can be easily identified and evince a naïve and simplistic nationalism. Carter sees the same phenomenon happening in late twentieth-century Canadian critical theory, as when, in another text, Hutcheon suggests that irony about nationality is a particularly Canadian virtue, or Robert Kroetsch argues that a “low-level” sense of national definition is part of the Canadian ability to survive (Carter 10). Nor is such an attitude absent from popular culture. Cynthia Sugars, in an article on the Molson *I am Canadian* ad campaign, notices a “studied anti-jingoism” as a common Canadian trait that provides a sense of moral superiority over the US (130), and traces the campaign’s success among Canadians to its use of irony (132–33).

My point here is that the kinds of irony in the commentary on the figurines appears intended to suggest the clichéd idea that Canada does not have as strong a sense of national identity as, for example, the US does. However, there may be some nationalist pride in this fact. In such thinking, Americans are GI Joes—“real” men of action vs. Canada’s more mundane public figures—but one implication of this identification is that it aligns Americans with the violent, common soldier who is taught to obey, with the additional implication that questioning Canadians are more sophisticated and self-aware in their attitudes towards nation. For example, Michael Wibberley, a gaming store manager, admires the Macdonald doll *because* of its difference from other action figures: “He’s tremendously out of place here. I just figured he’d be cool” (qtd. Crosbie, “Father” 1). Likewise, Eric Sorensen, host of CBC’s *The Current*, suggests that kids might use GI Joe to beat up John A. (a comment that obviously portrays the first Prime Minister in a rather wimpy, unflattering light), but Sorensen’s joke also suggests that it’s perceived American values he’s actually targeting (the “unsaid” ironic element) when he later implies that “educational toys” of any kind might have a better market in Canada than the US. This assumption points to a belief that Canadians are more self-aware and interested in education than Americans, with the implication that the latter want to be entertained only.

Such use of irony may *encourage* more nationalism in readers/listeners. Yoon Sun Lee, in *Nationalism and Irony*, points out that in the Romantic era, British conservatives used irony to contain resistance; an acknowledgement of Britain’s contingency as an entity could help sustain the nation, as it “could speak to those left unmoved by ideologies that took for granted spontaneous, deep attachment to a whole that was unproblematically given” (5). Such nationalists *consciously* enacted patriotism, pointing to its manufactured

status. Sugars views a similar pattern in Canada: an ironic rather than a straightforward nationalism can be more appealing to the populace, given the current and historical Canadian skepticism toward patriotism (132). At least some contemporary Canadian reporters seem to follow this process, with aims that are similarly conservative to those Lee addresses. The *Canadian Legends* figurines, with their overtly nationalist purpose, can be lightly denigrated and abused, *disfigured*, while still devotedly cherished, very much like any toy or fetish. The difference between the commentators and the buyers is that the toys become here fetishes in *absentia*: it is the idea of them, and the way this idea is figuratively manipulated, that is important, whether or not the commentators actually have the figurines in their possession. In fact, as Sugars points out, irony functions much like a fetish, allowing for contradictory belief: it can permit the expression of patriotism while appearing savvily to undercut it (133).

Thus, the irony evoked by the commentators might actually help *uphold* a conventional form of nationalism. This becomes clearer if we look further at what is *not* critiqued by the commentators. As Gertrude J. Robinson and Armande Saint-Jean remind readers in their discussion of representations of women in the news media, the media may not have sole influence over what the public actually thinks, but “they have a strong influence on what we think *about*” (23). For example, in this case the media sets the terms for the critique of Macdonald. The idolizing of a politician is mediated by reminders that he was a human being with flaws, in the case of Macdonald’s drinking, or by comparing him to contemporary, corrupt politicians, but none of the commentators questions whether these men were some of the most important in Canadian history, despite such flaws. Nor does anyone target the fact that all three of the figures are white males, as are many of those suggested by Nafekh and consumers as the subjects of future figurines: articles by Sarah Crosbie (“Father” 1) and Craig Albrecht list men such as Wayne Gretzky, Terry Fox, Pierre Trudeau, and Frederick Banting.²

The media’s lack of attention to the way that the figurines ignore the role of women in Canadian history is telling. As Barbara M. Freeman has observed in her study of the representation of women’s issues in the 1960s and ’70s, there is a complex history of sexism in Canadian media: “The mainstream news media are not, given their capitalist nature, revolutionary and feminist messages tend to be eventually subsumed to the status quo” (5). The lack of critique about the absence of women in the history the *Canadian Legends* represent might indicate a continuing gendered bias in reporting, despite the fact that some of the writers are women. When the commentary does name possible female subjects for future figurines, these are limited to women who were not social activists or politicians, downplaying women’s contributions as leaders. In the case of Lautens’ *Calgary Sun* article, women are further framed within gendered stereotypes. Robinson and Saint-Jean

detail the way that news media often pay much more attention to women politicians' looks and personal lives than their policies, and Lautens participates in such limited reporting. His commentary considers the potential of various contemporary politicians as models for the figurines. While most of his irony targets the political decisions or situations of men such as Lucien Bouchard or Paul Martin, his commentary on Belinda Stronach focuses on personal appearance, perhaps with an implicit sexualization of her that none of the other politicians receive: "No matter how you think she'd do as leader, you've got to admit she'd make a great action figure. Of course, she'd come with a bunch of little plastic handlers and a wardrobe no one else could afford." Lautens makes Stronach, by the association with a glamorous wardrobe, sound like a Barbie doll, reinforcing the idea of women as surface only, and of politics as better suited to men.

The lack of reactions to the racial hegemony of the toys points to another entrenched bias in the Canadian news media. Kamboureli points out that much media coverage of multiculturalism "disregards the formidable historical legacy of racialization and discrimination" (84) in Canada, and Dhuru Patel, in his contribution to the anthology *Race and Racism in 21st Century Canada*, argues "those who control and work in the media overwhelmingly share the perceptions and attitudes of the dominant white society. At a minimum, they frequently end up reinforcing the misperceptions, ignorance, and lack of understanding in Canadian society, including policy-makers" (263). Similarly, the news media's coverage of the *Canadian Legends* toys repeats the toys' own shallow coverage of Canada's history. Patel notes that popular discourses often portray the country's history positively, whereas "From the perspective of non-whites, many Canadian heroes, particularly those of the pre-1960s, were at best well-intentioned but patronizing individuals or, at worst, racists who often played pivotal or leading roles in the establishment or implementation of racist structures and policies" (268). The toys turn such historical figures into "legends" who take on proportions of greatness as part of a master narrative about Canada, and it is a version of history that the media implicitly supports: Macdonald is laughed at, but his treatment of the Métis, for example, mostly left uncriticized³; Brock's heroism is highlighted, but the biography that comes with the toy, which frames his Native allies as "helpers" only, is never questioned. While some commentators might criticize the flaws of the historical figures, for the most part the historical men's racist policies or their status as representatives of an oppressive colonialism are not included in such critiques.

Even further, much of the media commentary sets up, using irony, a binary between "true" Canadian nationalism and that of the immigrant, represented by Andrew Nafekh. Kamboureli argues that "one of the principal and, sadly, most effective strategies employed in journalistic reportage" is its address to "a collective 'we,' but a 'we' that invites identification only with

those Canadians who see themselves as products of the dominant culture” (82–83). This general strategy is upheld through the media’s use of irony in relation to the *Canadian Legends* toys in that it differentiates between reporters and readers from the dominant culture, and readers “outside” this culture. Hutcheon argues that, rather than irony *creating* communities of the included who “get” the irony and the excluded who do not, discursive contexts of different communities are what make irony possible (*Edge* 90–91). Thus, the “excluded” are those who function in a different discursive community than the ironist. This is an important point in that it stresses that readers or listeners outside of the dominant culture might still *notice* the commentators’ use of irony, but they are *constructed* by the irony as being unable to do so, and their reactions to the irony will differ from those who identify with the dominant culture. That is, the irony in the media coverage goes beyond the perspective Carter discusses, in that it is not aimed only at differentiating Canada from other countries that evince a simplistic nationalism, but against those *Canadians* who might evince a simplistic nationalism.

For example, the toys’ creator and co-owner of Nafekh Technologies, Andrew Nafekh, immigrated to Canada from Egypt as a child. In an interview in the *Toronto Sun*, Sonia Nafekh explains to Lesley Wright that Andrew came up with the idea for the toys because of his national pride: “He wanted to do something for Canada.” The *Sun* writer’s comments about the toys, though, perhaps suggest Wright’s own skepticism about pride in Canada: “Spawn and Spider-man had better watch their backs. This Canada Day, Sir John A. Macdonald will smite them with one swoosh of his super spectacles and history books.” The irony here derives from that fact that, of course, spectacles and history books are not conventionally heroic and probably won’t do any smiting at all; the figurine’s status as straightforward symbol of national pride is undermined, although perhaps with affection. It is a contrast between the idealistic nationalism of the immigrant and the “sophisticated” ironic nationalism of the media that is similar to that in many of the other commentaries (Fitzpatrick 14; Crosbie “Father” 1; Wattie A1; “Home-grown”), as when Christopher Hutsul quotes Andrew Nafekh as saying “We need to recognize the achievements of Canadians who have done something memorable for our country” while Hutsul himself writes of the Macdonald doll, “Perhaps the only thing missing is a little plastic whisky bottle” (E10).

Patel sees a distinction between the skeptical perspective on history characteristic of minority Canadians, and the ways such Canadians are constructed in the media as being overtly un-skeptical about the country. According to Kamboureli, one of the media’s common ways of presenting ethnicity is through the trope of the fairy tale. Andrew Nafekh’s story gets appropriated into this version of multiculturalism, that “Canada is hospitable to immigrants” and “the immigrants’ toil will yield a happy ending”

(Kamboureli 87). The biography of Andrew Nafekh presented in the *Hamilton Spectator* exemplifies such narratives:

Egyptian-born Nafekh immigrated to Canada at age one with his family, settling in the Hamilton area. He grew up in Grimsby, studied statistics at McMaster University, and spent thirteen years in the navy, where he climbed the ranks from cadet to Lieutenant. He now works in the private sector as a corporate trainer. (“Toys”)

Nafekh is presented as having worked his way up to success in a land of opportunity.

The idealization of the immigrant experience in Canada and the expectation that immigrants adapt a straightforward Canadian patriotism is further emphasized in government documents such as the Department of Citizenship and Immigration’s article for immigrants, “What Does Canadian Citizenship Mean?” which speaks of a Canadian sense of pride in the nation’s democracy, system of government, and peacefulness. The department’s website also encourages “citizenship reaffirmation” ceremonies in which “participants repeat the oath of citizenship to express their commitment to Canada” (Canada, “Reaffirmation”). “New Canadians,” then, are encouraged by official discourse to adopt an unskeptical acceptance of the nation and subscribe to its purported ideals unquestioningly. However, these official expectations of Canadian patriotism clash with the strong ironic mode of nationalism expressed in the commentary on the *Canadian Legends* toys, as well as in numerous other aspects of Canadian culture, as I’ve already suggested. There is a distinction implied in the commentary that I’ve cited between the grateful, overtly nationalist immigrant, and the “true” Canadian of the dominant culture who is more sophisticated in his/her nationalism.

One can see this further if one considers Carter’s comments about one possible application of his argument: “there may be troubling and unexamined intersections between the negation of national identity in the critical tradition and the construction of whiteness in the discourses of race and ethnicity of the last two centuries and more” (21). Carter points out how scholars have detailed the ways in which “white” is not frequently named as a race, or is the norm against which others are defined, just as issues of “gender” have often been used to refer to issues involving women only (21–22). For me, the ramifications of this within Canada in relation to nationalism are particularly troubling. If overt nationalism only refers to what other countries, or “other” Canadians do, then white Canada becomes constructed as a sophisticated norm against which others are compared. In fact, Patel argues that “Canadian” has become a racist term, referring only to white Canadians (267). Thus, “real” citizenship is constructed as involving an ironic posture towards the country, and perhaps only immigrants, such as Nafekh, spout a lack of irony. It puts immigrants, especially those who don’t belong to the dominant race, in

an impossible situation: immigrants are expected to demonstrate simplistic loyalty to their new country, but doing so marks them as outsiders. Irony becomes a mode of excluding those who do not participate in the joke. Patriotism becomes like the fetish in colonial history: publicly declared by those in power as a characteristic only of the “primitive.” Moreover, the limits of this irony postpone a more radical critique of nation. If Canada is defined by a lack of naïve nationalism, by an ironic tenuousness, this might make the nation appear un-oppressive, un-hegemonic, and open to everything and everyone. If Canada cannot be named, can it be critiqued?

A key question to ask here is this: What difference would it make if the *Canadian Legends* toy line included women and minority figures? Is this the necessary remedy to the above racism and sexism? While such figures would create a more inclusive narrative of Canadian history, there would be a potential danger here too. It is possible that the ironic reactions to the dolls are encouraged, in part, by their miniaturization. Millhauser argues that the miniature evokes a sense of power over the object for the observer, while the gigantic, on the other hand, evokes awe and fear (129–31). Thus, one might be more prone to laugh at the Isaac Brock figurine than the Isaac Brock monument, even if it is done so with a simultaneous adoration. Perhaps miniaturization in itself evokes derogation, whether it is a making the object the target of jokes or cherishing one’s power over it with patronizing affection. While this derogation is limited in the reactions to the existing *Canadian Legends* figurines—jokes about Macdonald’s drinking rather than criticisms of his racism—the effects of exposing marginalized figures to the same derogation might be more troubling. If Nafekh Technologies was to go ahead and create a Molly Brant or Louis Riel figurine, we might end up in the same territory that has caused criticism of Lynne Reid Banks’ children’s book, *Indian in the Cupboard*, or made a generation of feminists question the role of Barbie as a girls’ toy. Pauline Turner Strong, for example, points out that Little Bear in Banks’ book is an object of nostalgia and “intense longing,” as miniatures often are, but is hardly a historically fair representation of Native peoples (334). Thus, if the *Canadian Legends* figurines were based on peoples who have been historically derogated, their miniaturization might compound the derogation rather than decrease it.

Furthermore, one of the other characteristics of the miniature, according to Stewart, is that it is frozen in a single moment, like a tableau, and therefore simplified, outside of “reality” and history (48–60). This is, indeed, one of the limitations of the *Canadian Legends*: their version of history functions out of a complex context, with the biographies that come with the figurines, because they are aimed at children and at promoting nationalism, over-simplifying and idealizing history and its conflicts and uncertainties. Thus, should women or minority cultures be included in the line, their stories would be simplified too, emptied out into this general narrative of Canadian history and nationalism.

Moreover, such figurines might also threaten to contribute to the discourse of multiculturalism as “proof” of Canada’s acceptance of and equality among its diverse peoples. Both Kamboureli and Mackey notice the potential commodification of multiculturalism, and Mackey argues extensively that multiculturalism has frequently been evoked to help differentiate Canada as superior to the US and its “melting pot,” but also to delineate acceptable cultural differences, such as “ethnic” food and dance, while excluding political rights to minority groups in the service of a “unified” Canada. Likewise, a Louis Riel figurine might only commodify and “make safe” racial and cultural difference, subsuming the historical specificity of Riel’s experiences and personality into a master narrative celebrating Canada’s diversity. Figurines of women could encounter similar problems. McClintock argues, “Women are typically constructed as the symbolic bearers of the nation, but are denied any direct relation to national agency” (354). Thus, Laura Secord as a *Canadian Legend* might merely be appropriated into the same old narrative of white woman as builder of empire and nation, and Molly Brant would be celebrated for her loyalty to Great Britain, a sign of the Empire’s providing safe haven to Native peoples from American racist tyranny. Each would become someone who helped “hold this country together.”

Thus, the problem is not so much the need to include such figurines in the Canadian Legends line, as it is the media’s failure to address this omission at all, as well as its failure to target in any in-depth way the simplification of history that the toys endorse, and its presentation of politics and colonial history as something to be consumed rather than seriously queried. The booklets that come with the toys encourage an idealizing of historical figures and present violent conflicts as obstacles that are neatly overcome, as well as eliding the racism and sexism in Canada’s past and present. While some of the media commentary targets the idealizing, it leaves out entirely any targeting of the violence and prejudice. In fact, as I have argued, the news coverage actually helps sustain gendered and racial hierarchies through its use of irony to construct a Canadian nationalism that only appears to critique, or only critiques on a superficial level, Canadian nationalism. It continues a sense of “Canadian” as referring to those of the dominant culture and gender, even when it most seems to be undermining a concrete sense of Canada altogether. If, as Patel argues, the media influences not only public opinion but also government policy (263), then consumers of the media need to examine the media critically for its biases, and the discursive communities it relies upon.

Notes

1. Segments of this article were presented at the conference of the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers in English at the University of British Columbia in May 2008. Here, I expand my argument by providing a greater context in relation to patterns in Canada's news media, and more in-depth theorizing about fetishism, irony, colonialism, and nationalism.
2. Exceptions to such suggestions include Laura Secord and L.M. Montgomery (Crosbie "Sir John" 3), and Louis Riel (Wright).
3. The only exception is Stephen Lautens' article, in which he notes that the booklet that comes with the Macdonald figurine describes Riel as someone Macdonald "didn't get along with very well." Lautens remarks sarcastically, "I suppose, in Canadian politics, hanging someone qualifies as not getting along."

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