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Maurice Richard and the Canadian Psyche

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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It's always difficult to think of Canada as a foreign country. I once went to Canada without a passport or any other legitimate documents for border identification. Oddly, only the U.S. authorities had a problem with that.

Only the various signs of the French language and a certain sense of order and calm hint that you have left the place known in Canada as the Excited States. Even the French seems a bit less strange to me with my name, even though I know virtually nothing of the culture and language of my ancestors. In the time of my father Americans in Minnesota did not react kindly to a foreign language, while the drive of the immigrant for assimilation left a lot of cultural baggage in the dust.

Still Canada is a foreign country, at least in certain circumstances even if those are limited in time and space. So for ten days recently I moved through Western Canada vaguely aware that it is a different place, a difference underscored by the majesty of the Canadian Rockies, an especially strong contrast for someone out of the flatness of Florida. The presence of snow and ice in late May along with freezing temperatures, is a reminder of the days of my youth. As I scrape the windshield of the rental car with a credit card I am swept by waves of nostalgia.

On the open road the signs come at you in two languages and the distances and speed are measured in kilometers. On the radio the CBC presents people holding real conversations about important topics, or talking with one another as if they were neighbors sitting at the kitchen table. When reporting sports the CBC dwells on the Stanley Cup, dutifully gives the NBA playoff scores, and provides the baseball results but only for the Canadian based teams. I suspect this is some sort of revenge for U.S. television weather forecasts that ignore Canada and visually represent this nation as a gray mass near the top of the screen.

The place names seem exotic announcing Medicine Hat, Red Deer, and Yellowknife. The traffic report from Edmonton notes a delay on White Mud Road, a name that evokes place with the power of a blizzard.

Still, none of this is all that foreign.

Then about halfway through our visit Canada reveals its great difference. The death of Maurice Richard, "The Rocket," underlines the divided culture of our neighbor to the north. The reactions to the death, the comments on Richard's significance, reveal, although never fully, the culture that is Canada.

Interpretations of his life and death dwell on multiple meanings. First and foremost is Richard's role as a French-Canadian in the very English-Canadian world of the 1940s. Is he a unifying force as hockey hero for all Canadians? Is he a source of pride and even nationalism for the French of Canada? Yes, and yes.

Richard was not simply a French hero; he was a Canadian hero. From East to West small boys, whether English, French, or Ukrainian, hitting pucks in barns or skating on ponds with sticks dreamed of being the Rocket.

The pivotal event in this storied life of hockey greatness centers on the now legendary "Richard Riot" in Montreal in 1955. With three games left in the season the Rocket got in a nasty fight on the ice and in the process punched an official twice. NHL President Clarence Campbell suspended Richard for the last three games of the season and the playoffs. Four days later when Campbell was in Montreal to attend a game a stink bomb was thrown in the Forum and rioting quickly spread to St. Catherine's Street. Over a hundred arrests were made, a half million dollars of damage done, and the Rocket himself had to go on radio the next day to appeal for calm.

Many now consider this the catalytic event for the emergence of French-Canadian nationalism in Quebec, a riot of historic proportions. At the time, and for many still, Campbell was seen as an English villain attacking the French hero. The sales of Campbell soup plummeted, and the man who said, "I am only a hockey player" now was clearly the "Idol of Quebec" both on and off the ice.

The outpouring for Maurice Richard was well beyond anything I have seen in my lifetime for a hero from the world of sport. His body was on display in the Molson Centre where thousands came to pay their respects, lining up from 1:30 a.m. and coming from across Canada leaving behind their flowers and tears. The previous few days ordinary people moved by his death brought flowers to the Richard home and to the Richard Monument. On Wednesday a State Funeral was held in the Basilica of Notre Dame

presided over by the Archbishop of Montreal, Cardinal Jean-Claude Turcotte.

The greats from the Montreal Canadiens past were there, the powerful from Canadian politics were there, and the dignitaries from the NHL were there. The funeral itself was punctuated by three standing ovations, and the beauty of the ceremony and the power of the moment left not a dry eye in the cathedral. Outside the Basilica lining the streets were the Rocket's people waiting to offer a final "adieu" to the man once described as "The Wind on Skates."

For someone from south of the border it was a rare "glimpse into the heart of Canada," as one headline called it. But it was a glimpse limited by the barrier of language, a limitation I share with other Americans and too many English Canadians.

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