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## **Canadians: Heroes Without Heroes**

Everyone knows that the United States of America is the land of the free and the home of the brave. Canada, meanwhile, tags along with its impressive big brother, its people a washed-out, sad imitation of the noble Americans. Or so people say. Even some of Canada's foremost writers and columnists believe that Canadians are passive and cowardly – see Mark Steyn's recent column in Maclean's magazine. Steyn describes the Polytechnique shooting, when the university's male students were told by an armed gunman to leave the classroom, and uncomplainingly abandoned their female classmates. The assailant, unhindered by any resistance, proceeded to gun down the girls. Steyn uses Tim MacLean as another example, MacLean's fellow passengers on a Greyhound bus deserting him to die at the hands of a madman. Even the police in this situation, well trained and better armed, spent more than four hours outside the bus, unwilling to confront the murderer. Contrasted against these displays of cowardice, or at least passive obedience, are stories from other countries. Steyn mentions a professor in Virginia barricading a door with his body so students can escape. Another in Melbourne, wounded, manages with the help of his students to subdue their attacker. Steyn's point is clear, he considers Canadians a cowardly people.

Could this have something to do with the culture Canada promotes? The concept of a Canadian hero is a strange one to most. Americans can name their founding fathers, their discoverer Columbus, their favourite generals and admirals. But Canada never fought a war for its independence. We have no respect for the men who first landed on our shores. Generals and admirals are frankly un-Canadian. Some honour Terry Fox, others politicians from Mackenzie King to Pierre Trudeau. But a hero for all Canadians, from west to east, across our many

minorities, has never caught the national imagination. Could this be why so many Canadians, when faced with a chance to be a hero themselves, turn it down? Steyn's points, above, lead to three questions. Are Canadians, generally, unheroic? Is it true that we have no heroes in our culture? If we do have none, would the finding of a hero make us braver and better ourselves?

Could Steyn be right? Are Canadians truly unheroic? The examples in his column are convincing, but not backed up by more evidence they prove nothing. Anyway, there are Canadians who have acted just like the Virginia professor, just like the students in Australia. However, we don't hear about them. For example, August 1992 saw an armed man enter Concordia University in Quebec, ready to exact his revenge on those responsible for his imminent dismissal. He shot four staff, three of whom died, before taking a professor and security guard hostage. They, instead of doing what some consider the Canadian thing and waiting passively for death, attacked him. The professor kicked his gun away, and the security guard pinned him to the floor, keeping the man prisoner until police could arrive. This anecdote is just as valid as Steyn's, but proves exactly the opposite point. Add to this the many citizens who receive Governor General's awards for bravery every year, and one realizes that Canadians are no cowards.

In fact, Canadians have shown themselves to be heroic in every possible way. Being heroic is about inspiring people; it is being an example that others can emulate. Look at Terry Fox's run, and the thousands he inspired to give to a good cause; look at those who emulate him in a yearly run bearing his name. Could the Canadians serving in Afghanistan not be considered heroic? They may call it a career, but there are easier ways of feeding a family than battling terrorists on their very doorstep. Canada's reputation as a peacekeeping nation, in fact, proves the selflessness and heroics of our people. So Canada does have heroes in its ordinary men and

women, the people on the streets of every city from sea to sea to sea. But the Canadian culture keeps this idea under wraps.

Hero-worship, in the style of the United States of America, is unheard of north of the border. Charlotte Gray's first article explains why, using three points. First, our national culture is outweighed by our regional differences. A country as large as Canada, spanning many cultures and many more miles, doesn't easily agree on anything, let alone a single hero. Second, our history is a short one. Countries such as Britain and France can easily find heroes, as their histories are so long that a character's small flaws are forgiven. Third, Canadians value humility, modesty and compromise. Look at our Confederation, arranged peacefully and cooperatively. Canada is a nation of peacekeepers, not imperialists like our parent countries. Peter Newman's opinion comes to the same thing: that Canada has no heroes, and he agrees this is because we are generally too humble for such a thing. Both authors are quite right. No matter how you look at it, Canada's culture does not accept heroes. A country with such breadth, such mixed ethnicity, such a short history, and such humility will never find it easy to agree that a certain person deserves universal respect. This, along with Canada's substantial rates of immigration which constantly shift the cultural landscape, lead us to a Canada without heroes.

So would finding a hero in our culture make us braver and better ourselves? First, we have seen that Canadians are no less heroic than people from other countries. Like any nation, we have our share of good and bad, brave and weak. Would this change if we honoured particular people? Unlikely. Nothing has ever proven that idolizing individuals has a positive effect. As Charlotte Gray argues, the Canadian way emphasizes respect for ideals rather than idols. This in fact could be better than hero-worship. For does every hero not have a weakness, a part of his character which is always left unmentioned? Having no need for a single idol, as in

the United States, Canadians admire the ideals embodied by certain groups: the RCMP, the men and women in Afghanistan, our peacekeepers. Canada was founded on cooperation, and to this day we exemplify tolerance and respect for all. The notion of a solitary hero opposes this solidarity. These days, Canada stands in the world as a haven for immigrants, an accepting society, a country of friendly, gentle people. In times of trouble, the everyday Canadian heroes do appear, as they do in any nation. Idolizing individuals certainly couldn't change this for the better. But could hero-worship perhaps change Canada's open stance to all individuals, all religions, all minorities? Possible. Let's not find out.