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The Last Best West: A Canadian Myth of Success

This paper demonstrates how social myths play an important role in creating the collective imagination and provides a more detailed look at the Canadian frontier myth. At the turn of the twentieth century, Canada was actively promoted as the Last Best West. The idea that Canada would follow the American experience (or even that the twentieth century would be "Canada's century") lies behind the characteristic settlement propaganda around the turn of the twentieth century, which also lies at the core of one of the most familiar social myths – the American Dream. This paper constitutes a sociological examination of such propaganda.

Introduction

Social myths contribute to a broad interpretative sensibility that emphasizes important cultural and historical themes such as settlement, independence, religious transformation, political reforms, personal and social attainment, etc. Social myths are embedded in the creation of the collective imagination. Thus, especially there, there is a deliberate act of conscious choice and explicit allegiance rather than involuntary inheritance; social myths become the theoretical basis of collective identity, glue that holds together diversified communities (Anderson). In some ways, social myths can shape the lives of ordinary people far more than political orientation, ethnic origins, or economic stratification, because some well-institutionalized and evergreen myths (for instance, the American Dream) become a kind of lingua franca that everyone can recognize and understand easily (Cullen).

Of course, the possibilities and limits of such social myths are fiercely discussed (especially at a time of social and economic turmoil such as the current global economic crisis, which has affected the lives of people in many countries) (Barlett, Steele). Nonetheless, some myths are described as an opiate that simply lulls people into ignoring the harsh reality, and the very source of mythical power is ambiguity. To be sure, no social myth ever demonstrates a scientifically provable principle. Social myth is neither an eternal verity, nor a self-evident prophecy. More precisely, there is an abstract belief in possibility, which relies on the confidence of individuals that they will be chosen to overcome all odds and to fulfill their destiny (Cullen; Hochschild). However, the ambiguity of social myth means that it will never afford clarity of benefits and costs. This makes it difficult to explain any failures. On the other hand, it does not work for giving the basis of success, either. All social myths about individual and social attainment usually contain a trace of uncertainty that creates the stories about successful individuals who, in fact, find themselves overwhelmed by the prosperity they pursued and ultimately attained. Basically this is one of the most popular themes of social myths. They never know, but devotionally believe in. Otherwise, some ugly lives might not be deemed worth living.

The ambiguity of social myth means that there is a sort of core concept that could work. However, social myths with all their implications that can cut and intersect in different ways require a far more rigid explanation than is customarily given. Social myths have also transformed over time into a more comprehensive approach, which help them to gain the status of common sense. Thus, one could simply recognize the only definition of a social myth, while there are a few varieties of this myth. This is true if one takes a closer look at easily the greatest social myth ever created – the American Dream.

James Truslow Adams, author of a series of popular and readable books on American history, manages to give a vague definition of the American Dream. He describes it as "that dream of a land in which life should be better, richer and fuller for every man."¹ The definition contains catchy words such as *better*, *richer* and *fuller*, which indicate the promise of a happy ending. However, if one wants to investigate for the details, he/she will ask for a clarification of what it means. The following is the sort of answer one might receive. There would be plenty of food, plenty of land, plenty of minerals in the mountains and plenty of timber in the wilderness. In other words, this would be a bracing place to live. The only hitch is that you have to work hard for your grand time. Indeed, this is the sort of answer that might be given by Adams's fellow citizens of the 1930s. More recently, the definition of the American Dream has been challenged by Jim Cullen (The American Dream). He has attempted to update the list of possible answers. His conclusion is somehow pessimistic, but rational: the list is endless. Yet, when one interviews people about the American Dream, he/she will be struck by their level of certainty that they know what they are talking about.² Moreover, the American Dream has been codified as an idea by American politics and has been turned into a central mandate of the national character. One might claim that the American Dream attracts people from around the world to start new lives in the United States of America.

According to Cullen (*The American Dream*), the American Dream reconciles the contradictions between the pioneer impulses of the Founding Fathers and the more contemporary selves of Americans. His strategy to deal with the American Dream explores the major political and cultural events in the history of the United States of America such as the Puritan enterprise, the Declaration of Independence, Martin

¹ James Truslow Adams used the definition in *The Epic of America. The Epic of America* was first published by Little, Brown in 1931. His definition gained vast recognition. It is not clear, however, whether Adams actually coined the term or appropriated it from another author.

² For instance, see the Annual State of the American Dream Survey.

Luther King's dream of equality as well as sociological implications such as upward mobility, home ownership, or what has been termed "californication." It is no wonder that Cullen would rather use the plural to write about many American Dreams, since the American Dream is shown to be a very complex idea.

This paper does not provide a simple answer either. This introduction aims to show the complexity of social myths and some troubles that might arise when dealing with the concept of social myths. It is certain that each social myth requires a more thorough reckoning than is commonly understood. One of the most remarkable things about the American Dream is its unlimited ability to tell stories about human beings motivated by an impulse to pursue their dreams. This impulse is deeply rooted in the American Dream. It does not mean that only Americans are capable of making their dreams come true; however, it is Americans who have spread their notion of dream throughout the world, which is dependent on a sense of control over the course of individual lives. Henry David Thoreau, in Walden (1854), writes that "if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours."3 This motto (which one can find in many American narratives) has been reiterated each time a person has landed on American shores, from pilgrims to immigrants. This lies at the core of the American Dream. No one will guarantee that you will achieve happiness, but you can pursue it in as many ways as you choose.

Actually, this paper deals with a Canadian issue. There are certain implications in peopling the American and Canadian frontiers. Once the government advertisements even used the slogan "the Last Best West" to promote a Canadian campaign for settlement in Western Canada. This paper, however, does not exaggerate the comparisons between these two countries. For this simple reason, we could never use the term "the Canadian Dream." It is inappropriate. There is an attempt to show some points of similarity in order to gain a broader understanding of the phenomenon of social myths. Therefore, this paper focuses on creating a space for subsequent generations of settlers and immigrants to come and pursue aspirations they have found desirable. The paper explores the Canadian propaganda for the settlement of Western Canada: its origin and relevance to the notion of social myths.

The Last Best West and the gospel of the frontier

Canada was not a popular destination for immigrants until the United States of America, its neighbor to the south, had finished its settlement program. Nor can it be said that Canada was even recognized as a land of opportunities for the British people. They treated their dominion as the obscure periphery of the British Empire. Eventually the more pragmatic policy of immigration designated by Sir Clifford Sifton, the Minister of the Interior, in 1896 drew the attention of some European immigrants. However, the majority of them were not of British origin. The Conservative Party raised the alarm that Canada could be swamped by "Sifton's foreign pets" (as non-British immigration was called) (Albański, "Etniczność i dyskurs").

³ See Thoreau's entry in the Project Gutenberg, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/205/205-h/205-h.htm.

Sifton, himself, was fully aware of the need for selling the idea of Canada as a vibrant place in the New World to attract so-called "desirable immigrants." He explained his idea in the House of Commons using the following words: "In my judgment and the judgment of my officers the immigration work has to be carried on in the same manner as the sale of any commodity; just as soon as you stop advertising and missionary work the movement is going to stop."⁴ Thus, in his opinion, the government ought to use any marketing tools possible to promote Canada as an ideal country for ideal citizens. Maps, pamphlets, reports, statistics, advertisements and even fake letters of happy settlers in the American and European press were produced in order to attract prospective settlers. Slogans were developed to fit the new image of Canada. Canada was branded as the New Eldorado and the Last Best West.

The Last Best West had truly a strategic meaning. For Sifton it was a necessary component of selling the brand-new image of Canada to American farmers. They enjoyed a position of high esteem owing to their skills and experience. According to Sifton, they were the most desirable class of immigrants to settle the Canadian Prairies. In his famous essay The Significance of the Frontier in American History (1893), Frederick Jackson Turner exalts the virtues of an American frontiersman, who was described as ambitious, innovative and self-sufficient. In this same essay, he declares that the American frontier was closed, which was the true purpose of Turner's writing. The dream of the homestead-owner had already gone to the very heart of American identity. Land was always viewed as a desirable commodity. Moreover, the American Dream of owning land had a broader appeal because one acquires a place he/she could call his/her own. In other words, independent individuals could have control over the course of their lives. Moreover, the early notion of citizenship was strongly bound with the ownership of land. Furthermore, Theodore Roosevelt, in his The Winning of the West (1889), celebrates the newly-forged-frontier identity as a marker of the American race. It is no wonder that Turner's declaration of a closed frontier could haunt the dreams of many Americans about possessing their own family farm. Sifton seemed to understand the mythic power of a seamless process whereby land opportunities gave way to the farmer who tended land on which he built his home. Eventually, family farms gave way to block settlements and towns.

Turner views the frontier metaphorically as "a magic fountain of youth in which America continually bathed and was rejuvenated." For everyone, a target group of the Last Best West campaign could be simply labeled as (in Turner's words) "those who simply desired a new start." The advertisements were published under the united slogan of "Free Land Clubs" in strategic American newspapers.⁵ The government's gift of 160 acres for each settler aimed to direct the reader's attention to the advertisement's contents. Even though land was being given away for free, vocabulary still had to be carefully used to create a coherent vision of the New Eldorado for those readers who had swallowed the hook. From the start, it was clear that Canada offered plenty of opportunities for farming (in *The New Eldorado*, Canada is tagged as *wheat land, rich virgin soil, land for mixed farming,* and *land for cattle raising*. In another version of this advertisement, we find more key words: *the best wheat land, the richest grazing country under the sun,* etc.). Then the theme was developed to comfort

⁴ Debates of the House of Commons, Canada, 27 July 1899, columns 8654-8655.

⁵ See the appendix.

the audience by creating a balance between wide space and society. After all, the West should not be seen as too wild or remote. Canada is shown as the center of the world (*easy to reach*), friendly (*home for millions, homes for everybody*) and a civilized place (*protected by the government*). Even the harsh Canadian climate is euphemistically described as *the healthiest in the world*. At the end, there are more direct slogans to convince skeptics: *nothing to fear, this is your opportunity. Why not embrace it?* Or even slightly romantic: *build your nest in Western Canada*. The visual image also plays a crucial role in shaping the idea. One might say that a good picture is worth a thousand words. The juxtaposition of a farm house and horse-drawn carriage expresses the anticipated material prosperity. In another version of the advertisements there are pictures of cattle and horses. Ultimately amber waves of grain are a favorite element of each advertisement. Completing the written and visual arguments is the reason for settling the Canadian West. The desire for a family homestead could urge prospective immigrants to settle down in Canada.

Even though Sifton's Ministry of the Interior produced a utopian vision of an agrarian paradise, a population of preferred American immigrants was not enough to settle Western Canada. Another stream of immigration came from Europe. Although there were certain expectations of race, class and religion, Clifford Sifton opened the golden door of Canada for Central and Eastern European peasantry. In his famous speech to defend this decision, Sifton somehow talked more about the necessity than a preferred class of immigrants:

When I speak of quality I have in mind, I think, something that is quite different from what is in the mind of the average writer or speaker upon the question of immigration. I think a stalwart peasant in a sheep-skin coat, born on the soil, whose forefathers have been farmers for ten generations, with a stout wife and a half-dozen children, is good quality. A Trades Union artisan who will not work more than eight hours a day and will not work that long if he can help it, will not work on a farm at all and has to be fed by the public when his work is slack is, in my judgment, quantity and very bad quantity. I am indifferent as to whether or not he is British-born. It matters not what his nationality is; such men are not wanted in Canada, and the more of them we get the more trouble we shall have (16).

For Sifton, the process of settlement was bound to the realm of the spirit and to experience. It is part of what made frontier life almost sacred to those who really desired to settle the West. In this act of giving away virgin soil, individuals were given the promise of creating a better society. It was Frederick Jackson Turner (1893) who most clearly expressed a gospel of the frontier:

No grave social problem could exist while the wilderness at the edge of civilizations opened wide its portals to all who were oppressed, to all who with strong arms and stout heart desired to hew a home and a career for themselves. Here was an opportunity for social development continually to begin over again, whenever society gave signs of breaking into classes ("The Significance").

If it sounds like pure fantasy, it must be said that land made the defining criterion of what it meant to be truly free. A practical doctrine of work and achievement cultivated the value of the independent farmer. In other words, conquering the frontier became a testing ground for the Protestant ethic. The sacred vision of settling the West was adopted by Canadian novelists. Perhaps the most astonishing samples of such writing are Ralph Connor's *The Foreigner* (1909) and Nelly McClung's *The Painted Fires* (1925). Both Connor and McClung portray settlers' achievements in terms of moral values. In their gospel of the frontier, even destitute European immigrants would get rich provided that they worked very hard. According to them, the grandeur of the frontier has a magic power to transform human beings into industrious ones. It is no wonder that one of the characters in *The Foreigner* exclaims enthusiastically "how wonderful the power of this country is to transform men" (Connor 378). Indeed, ultimately a Slavic immigrant is assimilated into the dominant culture in Connor's novel because he demonstrates a strong commitment to change himself.

It is one of the remarkable aspects of the frontier myth that it takes the successful assimilation of foreigners for granted. Nowhere have the assumptions and passion for inequality been more entrenched than in ethnic relations. Many ethnically and racially diversified societies have substantially embraced inequality as the foundation for their social organization. Why did the frontier society make it different? It was because the frontier myth depended on the notion that equality plays a crucial role in implementing a new order. The principal attraction of the frontier myth is that everyone is eligible (as long as he/she is industrious). Thus, there are no such resentful feelings towards strangers as Rudyard Kipling expresses in his Letters to the Family: Notes on a Recent Trip to Canada (39): "The stranger within my gate, He may be true or kind, But does not talk my talk - I cannot feel his mind. I know the face and the eyes and the voice, But not the soul behind." Even more interesting is that government pamphlets never discouraged any particular ethnic group from settling in Western Canada. Moreover, promises were extended to everyone. Of course, there is a difference between principle and reality. However, it is hardly a problem as long as the formula of myth is commonly affirmed.

Immigrants had trouble acquiring the knowledge, materials and capital necessary to farm even land that was given away for free. Moreover, some of the Western Canadian territories were not really suited for farming. The official propaganda barely mentioned this. One of the government pamphlets stated, "as you go west along this strip you find yourself at last in a district where the rainfall is uncertain, this being the only part of the American desert which is found outside the United States. Even here, however, many men who have had experience of dry lands further south are confidently making homes for themselves" (Department of the Interior 39). There is no caution that the land is unattractive and not for farming. Even drought-prone areas are euphemistically labeled as areas which are not recommended to inexperienced settlers. There is little doubt that Western Canada is portrayed with frequent emphasis on its potential for settlement. It thus raises the question of possible failure.

Ironically, the official propaganda of the New Eldorado could lead many people to congregate in towns and cities. It described Western Canada in a narrow way, as a place where wealth was easy to gain, in order to attract immigrants. Neither physical hardships of pioneering nor mental hardships of social isolation were mentioned. There is a scholarly discussion of how many people could lose their homesteads and had to leave for urban areas to make a living (Friesen; Katz, Lehr). The dominant fact of immigration discourse was that the official propaganda never encouraged urban workers to come to Canada. Moreover, ethnic urban enclaves were projected as a nightmare scenario of immigration. The North End, an ethnic neighborhood in Winnipeg, was described as a hotbed of violence, vice and social dissolution, and its inhabitants as "the men who dig sewers and get into trouble at the police court" (Albański, "Etniczność i dyskurs"). Obviously the description of the North End had nothing in common with the idyllic rural vision of Western Canada. Moreover, a quick glance at that ethnic neighborhood could undoubtedly ruin the myth of the New Eldorado. However, the very powerful source of each myth is its ambiguity. After all, immigrants sought sudden fortunes on the Canadian prairies, a mythical, not physical, place where land and wealth were all the more compelling if achieved through hard work. The host society had little mercy for these immigrants who fought for their survival in urban areas. As mentioned before, the process of settlement had a very moral dimension, and hence those who failed might confront the troubling question of their worthiness. In the eyes of the host society, such people were not worth the blessing of Canadian hospitality.

Canada's century: claims for power

In his well-known essay on the American frontier, Turner ("The Significance") wrote that settling the frontier closed the first period in American history, which had started with the discovery of the New World and continued through the War of Independence and life under the newly-acclaimed Constitution. For Turner, a closed frontier meant that the United States of America had just gone its own way to define new objectives. It was Theodore Roosevelt, himself, who masterfully used the myth of the American frontier to formulate his broader political ideas. The optimism and confidence in domestic affairs spilled over into American attitudes toward foreign policy. Roosevelt, as a prominent advocate of American imperialism, led the way in defining the new role of the United States of America in the world. Roosevelt's essential principles of diplomatic philosophy can be found in the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, in which he articulated the role of American power in the Western Hemisphere as an imperialist right. From the beginning, Roosevelt drew on Social Darwinism to define the objectives of his political program. In his view, American men could only prove the virility of whiteness if they turned to the "strenuous" life, which meant the acceptance of imperialistic warfare and racial violence as legitimate goals to control the inferior races. In his major work The Winning of the West (1889), Roosevelt described the race war as the key to understanding American identity, forged on the frontier. It is certain that Roosevelt basically perceived imperialism as a prophylactic means for preserving the virile American race (Albański, "Social Darwinism").

The frontier myth, combined with the growing application of the Darwinian theory of the "survival of the fittest" to human affairs and the progress of race, creates a new version of a myth which is primarily based on claims for power. An overly optimistic view on Canadian progress contributes to the popular idea of the twentieth century being "Canada's century."⁶ The mass settlement of Western Canada

⁶ It was Sir Wilfrid Laurier, the Canadian Prime Minister, who manifested an optimism supported by the Western boom. According to him, the outlook was bright for Canada in

played a crucial role in promoting this idea. Canada had to follow the American example opportunely, in order to no longer dwell in the shadow of the United States of America and to become a new champion of the New World. In Canada, there were plenty of natural resources and plenty of land opportunities, but, even more importantly, Canada was established by people of British heritage. Ethnic origins were usually referred to in both terms – biologically and culturally (Albański, "Social Darwinism"). While the biological meaning clarified the Anglo-Saxon evolutionary superiority, the cultural meaning expressed the apex of Anglo-Saxon civilization, its traditions, customs and institutions. The colonists and settlers usually created a narrow-minded definition of belonging to an imagined community. After a time of imaginary equality for newly arrived settlers had passed, there was an attempt to become more British than the British people in the United Kingdom. The influx of immigrants accelerated such sentiments (Albański, "Blood will tell").

Nothing unified the Canadian elite like immigration issues. The unspoken question was, however, whether cheap farm labor was a benefit for the Dominion or a problem to be solved. Political leaders agreed that immigrants had generally too low a level of manners, morals and intelligence to play any significant role in building a new society. Therefore, many politicians started to be worried about the sort of country that would result from immigration (Albański, "Blood will tell"). On the other hand, there was evidence that immigration brought material benefits to Canada. This was true overall, because immigration meant a bigger gross domestic product, higher productivity and lower labor costs. Of course, such benefits mostly went to the wealthier people and politicians.

There was a general interest in finding both scientific and moral confirmations of socioeconomic inequality. A belief, based on the ethnocentric doctrine known as the "white man's burden," that Anglo-Saxons had created a superior civilization, led to the obligation of spreading the blessing of society to less fortunate people (Albański, "Social Darwinism"). Immigrants were categorized in general as genetically inferior, since the criterion of the "fittest" was based on a crude version of Social Darwinism, in which the combination of ethnic and socioeconomic origins explained everything. In the eyes of political leaders, poor and illiterate immigrants were unworthy of an Anglo-Saxon racial genius for self-governing. Thus, the only way to control immigrants was to patronize them. This created another missionary myth of transforming the poor masses into White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASP).

It never happened, though, because ethnic origins were seen as biologically determined and culturally constructed (Albański, Albańska-Krywult). In order to erase hereditary contamination, he/she could change his/her clothes, habits and moral values, and speak English. However, such changes could always be questioned. Especially when many Canadians believed that their society was threatened by ethnic and racial inefficiency. British descent had almost a sacred meaning; people of British origin believed that they were people of a better stock and thus possessed a moral right by birth to look down on other inhabitants. Nonetheless, the myth of assimilation conveyed immigrants' pursuit of happiness in a constant search for personal and economic redemption.

^{1904,} and thus, as its Prime Minister proclaimed, "the $20^{\rm th}$ century will be the Century of Canada."

Coming to Western Canada represented the dream of possessing land for many European immigrants battered by poverty and the decline of land opportunities, but the dream too often became a nightmare. They had to move from a rural pre-capitalist life into an urban industrial one (Albański, "Etniczność i dyskurs"). The rise of industrial capitalism, fueled by the Social Darwinian vision of the survival of the fittest, depreciated the existence of many individuals. Nevertheless, it created another version of the myth that dreams were not impossibly out of reach. Even the first generation of immigrants had conflicting emotions about immigration, and firmly believed that their children would fulfill their own dreams of a more prosperous life and business. One of the most powerful accounts of the dissolution of this myth is Phillip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997).

Embracing the ideology of the fittest, immigrant parents tried to invest in the education of their children in order to offer them an opportunity for equal chances. However, equality of opportunities was not always realized. For instance, the University of Manitoba instituted a quota system for ethnic minorities in 1928. The increasing aspirations of ethnic minorities would disrupt the symbolic order of society and, even worse, call the theory of racial supremacy into question. There were obvious social and economic barriers forcibly preventing immigrants and their children from being too successful. Nonetheless, the dominant society maintained a safety-valve for most determined individuals. After all, immigrant children were not banned from attending university entirely; the quota system just made it difficult. The dominant society always left some jobs and businesses that "Canadians will not do" in the market economy.

No matter how odd it sounds, all of this allowed immigrants to believe that they lived in a reasonably fair country that respected their hopes for socioeconomic progress. The restricted opportunities just made their possible success more of a challenge. Immigrants fully accepted social inequalities because they strongly internalized the notion that outcomes could be different. A few individuals achieved success, which only legitimized the entire system of social redistribution.

Conclusion

A social myth can be reinvented in various ways. Sometimes it is one of manifold ironies which can be a source of hope, but also a source of frustration. One might frequently hear that it was not a dream of our forefathers. This is true, generally speaking. No myth should be judged on the basis of its veracity but rather its metaphorical meaning, which is entrenched in time and space between past and present. This has created an intensified appeal and response.

One might wonder to what extent the appeals in the government advertisements represented the realization of one of the core myths of Canada and Canadian citizenship, referred to as "the Canadian mosaic." The metaphor of the Canadian mosaic, coined by John Murray Gibbon in 1938, has impregnated the way in which contemporary Canadian society is viewed. It is not suggested, though, that the Last Best West propaganda was developed to achieve it. If the founding fathers of the Canadian West settlement could have comprehended the policy of multiculturalism, perhaps they would have found it reprehensible. It is clear, however, that their propaganda reiterated the value of Canadian citizenship in a sophisticated manner. Stephan Leacock (1937, preface) writes that "going west, to a Canadian, is like going after the Holy Grail to a knight of King Arthur. All Canadian families had, like mine, their Western Odyssey." And then it looks at the most widely realized frontier myth that the process of settling the West encouraged individualism and rewarded initiative. This is reflected in the liberal democratic ethos of present times, which has shaped the intellectual framework of the current debates over multiculturalism (Kymlicka).

Across Canada's Prairie Provinces, pioneer landscapes are disappearing quickly. Traces of the multitude of ethnicities that once were the hallmark of prairie pioneer settlement are becoming rare. The ongoing modern development is taking its toll on the landscape, transforming it into cultural and architectural homogeneity. Nonetheless, the cemetery remains the most visible symbol of pioneering life in the modern landscape. Many of the memorials refer to the frontier myth, while a few grave inscriptions reveal the true hardships of pioneering life.

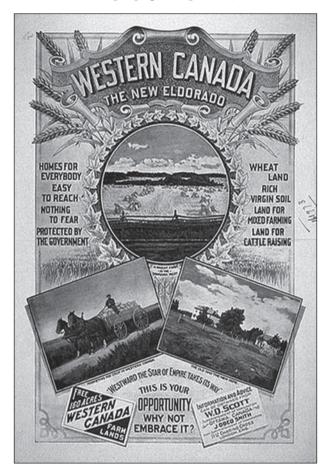
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Appendix 1

Figure 1. Government propaganda poster (The New Eldorado)



Source: National Archives Canada, http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/public_mikan/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=2945432&rec_ nbr_list=2945432 [accessed: 19.09.2013].

Appendix 2



Figure 2. Government propaganda poster (*The Last Best West*)

Source: National Archives Canada http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/ public_mikan/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=2837956 [accessed: 19.09.2013]