

Life on the Rock: Island and Identity in Mary Walsh's "A Hymn to Canada"

Jennifer MacLennan
University of Saskatchewan

Margaret Atwood's celebrated construct of survival has long been accepted as a "unifying and informing symbol" (Atwood, "Survival" 31) of Canadian cultural discourse, particularly in its literary works, though not exclusively so (For example, a small sampling includes Adams; Craig; Newman; Clark; Lamont; Orchard; Richler; Weaver; Davies; Berton "Why We Act"; Desbarats; Rohmer; Herstein et al; Grant). Indeed, this concern with identity and cultural survival has been described as having "obsessed the media and the politicians and a great many ordinary, thinking Canadian people" (Woodcock 292). Satirist and social commentator Mary Walsh is no exception, as her 1993 Spry Lecture, "A Hymn to Canada," explicitly demonstrates. With respect to its celebration of survival as a "realistic and even hopeful" Canadian symbol (5), this speech is a typical—perhaps even unremarkable—product of its cultural context.

However, to dismiss Walsh's effort as simply one more example of the working out of the survival motif is surely to miss much of its meaning as a representative discourse in the search for Canadian identity. While it is true that the rhetoric of Canadian identity reveals a discourse of difference marked by a thematic preoccupation with images of resistance and survival, my contention is that discourses in this tradition exhibit a set of pervasive cultural patterns that include, but go well beyond, the notion of survival. Walsh's speech, like other signal discourses in the tradition (including, but not limited to, Hurtig; Connors; Berton; Massey), depends for its effectiveness on its invocation of a cultural thread that can be traced through the distinctively Canadian artifacts of popular culture at least as far back as Don

Messer's *Islanders*, a fixture on Canadian radio and then television until well into the 1970s. As I will show, the discursive tradition in which this speech participates anchors our understanding of Canadian identity in an "Island view of the world" that shapes how Canadians think and talk about what it means to be Canadian (MacLennan, as well as MacLennan and Moffatt). Indeed, whenever a conscious construction of identity is presented, it is encoded in expressions of regional, and in particular Island-like, qualities of singularity and resistance.

The Island sensibility can be seen in an identifiable pattern of related metaphors and commonplaces that permeate many of our popular texts, as well as in explicit identification with Island culture that is increasingly evident in Canadian popular discourse. It also helps to account for the popularity of such Island icons as musicians Don Messer, Stompin' Tom Connors, Rita MacNeil, and the Rankins; writers Daniel MacIvor, Anne-Marie MacDonald, Wayne Johnston, and Hugh MacLennan; broadcasters and critics Linden MacIntyre, Rex Murphy, Nathan Cohen, and Danny Gullivan; and fictional characters like Anne of Green Gables, to name but a few of the influential Islanders who have helped to shape the Canadian cultural landscape.

One feature of the Island mythos is of course the inevitable motif of survival. But the pervasive mythos of the Island includes a number of other elements more complex and subtle than survival alone. For example, the Island as symbol necessarily also captures the conflation of place and identity that Northrop Frye counts so important to an understanding of the Canadian experience (Frye, "Hunted" 22), and embraces, as a central feature, the irony of the Island's love-hate relationship to mainland culture. Further, much of our popular discourse marks itself as distinctively Canadian through its use of personal narrative as a form of rhetorical enactment, its transformation of the rhetor into a heroic "everyman" figure (MacLennan, "I Can't" and "The Voice"), and its celebration of the outsider and orphan as "authentic" Canadian (MacLennan,

“Canadianizing,” Dull). Finally, Island identification embraces the cultural “outsider,” a frequently comic folk figure marked by elements of ridicule, eccentricity, and heroic acts of resistance. Such structural and thematic patterns provide a focus for the enactment of cultural identification, and in these respects Walsh’s address is quintessentially Canadian.

More than anything else, of course, Islanders’ sense of identity is inescapably framed by the clearly-defined physical space they inhabit. Indeed, for an Islander, place and identity are one and the same. Walsh points out that it is precisely their fealty to “that God-forsaken barren beautiful rock” that has given Newfoundlanders a powerful cultural identity that “we’ve clung to . . . as tenaciously as we’ve clung to that rock in the sea” (Walsh, “Hymn” 5). Within the framework of her speech, it is this territorial imperative that provides the model of cultural identification that Canadians are urged to embrace, and not for the first time. Northrop Frye, among others, recognized the extent to which the Canadian imagination has been founded on its attempts to come to terms with the landscape when he observed that, for Canadians, the question of “who am I?” is more accurately rendered as “where is here?” (Frye, “Hunted” 22). For the Islander, however, the question of “where is here” simply does not arise. As Walsh notes, Frye’s questions “were never Newfoundland’s questions—we always knew who we were and where we were” (Walsh, “Hymn” 5).

As Frye explains, cultural identity is necessarily rooted in the local and regional, in a sense of place and belonging conceived on a smaller geographical scale than Canada’s enormous landmass (Frye, “Bush Garden” ii). Smaller, geographically separate, and culturally unique, the Island offers well-defined physical boundaries that help to maintain the sense of difference between “here” and “there” that John Fiske argues is essential to all cultural identification (24). Newfoundland novelist Wayne Johnston’s Joey Smallwood expresses this phenomenon

explicitly: “For an islander, there had to be natural limits, gaps, demarcations. . . .Between us and them and here and there, there had to be a gulf” (132).

If the key to establishing a strong sense of identity lies in this symbolic claiming of territory and strong sense of place, Canadians, spread as they are over an almost impossibly huge expanse of geography and under constant threat of cultural assimilation, are faced with an extraordinary challenge. Margaret Atwood captures the dilemma exactly when she describes Canada as having traditionally been, both geographically and metaphorically, “an unknown territory for the people who live in it” (Atwood, “Survival” 13); “I’m talking about Canada as a state of mind, as the space you inhabit not just with your body but with your head” (18). Conceptualizing Canadian culture in “Islandized” terms brings Canada’s “unknown territory” into a more manageable perspective, allowing us to lay claim to the strong sense of identification that distinguishes the Island.

Its geographic singularity makes the Island a natural pocket of resistance against the influences of the surrounding dominant culture, and therefore a natural vehicle of metaphorical identification for any group that must maintain a separate cultural identity within a larger, more powerful and pervasive surrounding culture. For a threatened culture with no such natural boundary, identification with the Island is one way to impose a division between “here”and “there,” and to maintain a strong and necessary sense of “us” amid the prevailing influence of “them.”As John Fiske explains, “all social allegiances have not only a sense of *with whom* but also of *against whom*: indeed, I would argue that the sense of oppositionality, the sense of difference, is more determinant [of identity] than [is a sense] of similarity” (24).

The reason for Canada’s powerful identification with an “Islandized” perspective is immediately obvious: culturally, at least, Canada *is* an Island, surrounded by a sea of American

influence. Few countries in the world have remained unmarked by American globalisation, but Canada's situation is more precarious than most due to the combination of its geographic proximity to the cultural powerhouse of the US, and its smaller population and economic clout. As Pierre Trudeau famously noted, "Canadians should never underestimate the constant pressure on Canada which the mere presence of the United States has produced. . . . Living next to you is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant. No matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast, if I can call it that, one is affected by every twitch and grunt" ("Address").

The "Island view of the world" has about it some of the qualities of what Northrop Frye characterized as a "garrison" mentality (Frye, "Conclusion" 342). However, Frye's metaphor, implying as it does an immaturity that must be outgrown and ultimately cast off, fails to account for the continued shape of the Canadian cultural mindset. What we are seeing in Canadian preoccupations with survival is in my view not the garrison at all, but the more complex construct of the Island—a mature cultural mythos that captures Canada's situation not only culturally, but economically, politically, and geographically. It is a situation that is unlikely to change as long as Canada exists as an independent country, since—like all Island communities—it is inundated by influences from outside, including cultural products such as films, television programmes, and magazines, consumer and retail outlets, and fast food chains. Even in schools and universities, Canadian students read primarily from American textbooks that feature the naturalized values of American culture rather than those of their own (MacLennan, "Canadianizing"). Unfortunately, as many critics have observed, these material and cultural acquisitions frequently come at the expense of our own cultural expressions (for instance, Dorland; Brunt; Martin; Davies; Meisel; Francis; Berton, "Hollywood's Canada"; Atwood, "Canadian-American"; Massey; Aird).

Fear for the culture's survival and a concomitant insistence on distinctiveness are inevitable products of such a situation (see Scowen; Stanford; MacGregor; Klein; Martin "We Always"; Simpson; Granatstein; Flaherty and Manning; Granatstein and Hillmer; Gwyn; Barber), and the Island is an inevitable metaphor for a culture so besieged. Far from "outgrowing" Canada's Island mentality, Canadian popular culture continually reaffirms it through such phenomena as Rick Mercer's "Talking to Americans" segments on *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* (Mercer; Toth), the overt nationalism of Stompin' Tom Connors ("What Other Folks Had to Say"), the exuberant celebration of Canadian Olympic gold in hockey at the 2001 Olympics (Deacon, Sheppard, Levin), and Molson's well known "I am Canadian" advertising campaign (Gill). These expressions and many more like them illustrate the power that an assertion of cultural difference still has to evoke strong emotion from the majority of Canadians—even when the source is a beer advertisement (MacGregor; Sokoloff; Flynn).

In addition to making the Island a natural symbol of survival and identification for a marginalised culture, its physical boundaries constitute a symbolic barrier that actually helps to preserve the unique values and experiences of the community. In her study of Cape Breton Island, for example, Carol Corbin echoes Walsh when she explains how such tangible boundaries function both geographically and conceptually to impose a sense of definition and to enable the culture to "retain its identity while being bombarded by media messages—primarily American media messages—produced by different cultures in distant places" (178).

As a "hymn" to Canadian culture, Walsh's speech takes explicit note both of the extent of American influence and the inevitability of our resistance to it, and it invokes the Island as a source of cultural centredness and resistance. Walsh applauds the fact that, despite our being "so endlessly bombarded by American culture and American images and American dreams and

American everything,” we continue to insist on our own distinctiveness: “still we come together and say, ‘But we’re Canadians,’ and we express ourselves as Canadians, and we continue to feel that that’s an important thing” (6). In fact, like the cultural theorist John Fiske, Walsh recognizes that it is our continuing pattern of resistance and opposition to the dominant culture of the U.S. that enables Canadian culture to exist at all, and that provides “the real reason, apparently, that there is an us” (4). As Pierre Berton’s well-known formulation would have it, “we know who we are not even if we aren’t quite sure who we are; we are not American” (“Why We Act” 72). Continuing to resist American cultural bombardment is necessary and inevitable, and it is this resistance that has allowed us to become what Walsh describes as “so inexorably ourselves that at this point I don’t really think we can become anything else” (“Hymn” 6).

Certainly a main feature of the “Island view of the world” is its resistance to “mainland” values that threaten to subsume it. The Islander embraces difference on both individual and community levels, and typically expresses that difference in a cultural “anti-language”—a mode of discourse that is “set up and used as [a] conscious alternative to the dominant or established discourse types” (Fairclough 91) The anti-language of the Island is one that emphasizes folk elements of ridicule, eccentricity, heroic acts of resistance, and survival against the odds—all elements familiar in popular discourses of Canadian identity, from editorial cartoons to Farley Mowat’s *My Discovery of America* to Walsh’s own eccentric characterizations on *This Hour has 22 Minutes*.

However, the Island identity is more complex than a simple linear pattern of resistance suggests. Island experience necessarily endorses a strong sense of cultural as well as geographic separateness, but the culture of resistance is not seamless. Even as Islanders take pride in celebrating their distinctiveness, they remain—however marginally and whether they like it or

not—members of the broader culture, to which they may still instinctively look for recognition and validation of their experience. This “recognition anxiety” makes the process of identity formation a complex and ironic one for Islanders. On one level, the inevitable rejection of Island values by “mainstream” culture, in the form of ignorance or outright repudiation, serves as an ironic confirmation of Island difference. As long as this rejection continues, Islanders can be sure that they have successfully resisted assimilation.

On another level, however, Islanders desire, even seem to crave, acknowledgement from mainland culture. Unfortunately, too often the price of acceptance is assimilation, a condition that Islanders themselves in turn reject. Thus, either response from the mainland—acceptance or rejection—serves to confirm the Islander’s sense of difference, and prompt further acts of resistance that reaffirm a sense of the Island’s separate identity. Thus, even as they resent the indifference of the “mainland,” Islanders read its repudiation of their culture as a form of validation.

This quintessential expression of such Island ambivalence in the Canadian mindset is evident, for instance, in the love-hate relationship with American culture so prevalent in Canadian media. As Pierre Berton explains, Canadians “admire Americans, but it’s a bit of a love-hate relationship. We don’t like cosyng up too closely” (“Why We Act” 5)—mostly because “we are in danger of being swamped by you” (71). This sentiment is familiar enough to have been exploited by Canadian publishers in their campaign against US split-run magazines. “We Love Americans,” announced an advertisement that appeared in many Canadian magazines in 1999, “That doesn’t mean we want to be them” (Bill C-55 Working Group).

The pattern of seduction and repudiation evident in Island ambivalence results in a celebration of mainland displays of ignorance about Island ways—a prototype of the Canadian

fascination with tales of American ignorance of Canada (Wilson Smith; Fotheringham; “Identity in Crisis”; Smith; Garfield). Thus, one of the features that marks Canadian popular culture as “Islandized” is the commonplace that has been described as “one of our longest-running jokes—Americans’ lack of knowledge of their next-door neighbours” (Toth). This obsession is frequently evident, for instance, in Canadian editorial cartoons, and has been exploited to hilarious effect in Rick Mercer’s wildly successful *22 Minutes* sketch, “Talking to Americans” (Mercer 27).

Despite the validation of Island identity provided by mainstream rejection, however, the confident assertion of Island difference is routinely undermined by an accompanying fear that we may actually *be* inferior. That is, members of the marginalized culture may covertly doubt the legitimacy of their own cultural experience because it appears to be invalidated by more “genuine” experiences reported from outside. Walsh speaks of growing up with the “feeling that the real world was taking place somewhere else, that the real things, the important things, were happening somewhere else, and that I was so far away from it that I might never partake of a real life” (“Hymn” 2). She attributes this experience in part to “reading books written exclusively by authors from Great Britain and the United States” (3) and to “TV . . . our constantly open window on the real world of Los Angeles and New York” (2). This Canadian sense of “alienation and . . . of not belonging in the real world” (3) is confirmed by both Margaret Atwood and Pierre Berton. Atwood observes that growing up Canadian meant that “history and culture were things that took place elsewhere, and if you saw them just outside the window you weren’t supposed to look” (Atwood *Survival* 18). The result of such cultural displacement, says Berton, is the distinctively Canadian habit “of seizing on the American model and believing it to be the only one” (Berton “Why We Act” 89), and in response judging our own culture inferior.

Thus, despite the Island's confident answers to the twin challenge of discovering "Who am I?" and "Where is here?" Walsh notes the ambivalence of its relationship to the mainstream culture of which it is also a part. The result of such ambivalence is that Island identification is anything but simple, and is plagued not by the question of "where is here?" but by other, more perplexing questions: "Why is what we are considered to be so valueless?" and "why does where we are, so important to us, seem of no importance to anyone else?" (Walsh, "Hymn" 5). It is easy to extrapolate to Canadian culture in general, and especially to the "national inferiority complex," a habit of mind that Walsh disdains: "what is it," she asks, "that makes us constantly think that we're not as good as the other buddy next door? Why are we so ashamed of what shaped us?"

Walsh's speech, with its roots in Island authenticity, recognizes the dilemma, but also offers a solution of sorts to this Canadian preoccupation. "Somehow or other," she notes, "we've always thought that their [the American] vision was better . . . and that our vision was pedestrian in a way." However, despite such fears, Walsh intends to demonstrate that the Island, and particularly Newfoundland, provides rich resources for claiming a well-defined identity. Ultimately, the goal of her speech is to teach us to see "our vision as real and their vision as bullshit" (6), to make us understand that "Canada is a strong country, with a strong sense of identity and that no matter how many TV stations come in from Detroit, or how many beam in from Bucharest or Paris, that Canada will continue to fight and struggle to be and express herself as who she is" (7). Thus, even as the Island as symbol dictates the ongoing necessity of cultural resistance and estrangement, it also offers a solution to our identity crisis that can be found by embracing our own resources of identification. It is an irony of the Island that the two are conflated.

Ultimately, Walsh insists, a culture's identity grows out of its unique experience, and need not—indeed cannot—simply mimic another. “If you talk about our culture, then that is our culture: we and the way we express ourselves and how we express ourselves, through everything we do, would be our culture” (“Hymn 9). In the end, it is our own experience that we must accept and validate, as Walsh's own speech demonstrates in both content and pattern. Thus, she insists, “survival and the managing to get by and get through is in fact something that should be celebrated and hymns should be sung to” (6).

There can be little doubt that Walsh's “Hymn to Canada” presents a conscious construction of Canadian identity that encodes the “Islandized” mythos in its conflation of geographic and cultural distinctiveness and in its overt resistance to mainland values. However, the “Island view of the world” is marked by a number of other features that show up in the popular discourses of the genre. For instance, it is strongly anecdotal, establishing and preserving its authenticity in stories that celebrate a sense of distinctiveness and tradition. The narrative inclination can easily be seen in such representative works as the award-winning *Cape Breton's Magazine* and the books that grew out of it (Caplan), in works such as Corbin and Rolls' *The Centre of the World at the Edge of a Continent*, and in popular works like the music of Stompin' Tom Connors' or the Men of the Deeps.

So strong is this yarn-spinning sensibility that discourses offering a conscious construction of Canadian identity are almost inevitably configured as personal narratives. Though anecdotal in form, such narratives serve a more sophisticated function than simple storytelling. Instead, they are a kind of rhetorical enactment, a strategy by means of which the rhetor herself “incarnates the argument, *is* the proof of the truth of what is said” (Campbell and Jamieson 9). Through this device, the rhetor's individual experience is conflated with a broader

Canadian cultural reality; thus, what happens to the rhetor is a depiction in personalized terms of what is taking place in the culture at large. The rhetor is thereby transformed into a cultural “everyman” figure, whose experiences symbolize the Canadian journey to identity.

Rhetorical enactment has become something of a commonplace in representative discourses of Canadian identity, from Pierre Berton’s *Why We Act Like Canadians* to Stompin’ Tom Connors’ *Before the Fame*; from Margaret Atwood’s *Survival* and “Canadian-American Relations” (1982) to John Fraser’s “Who Cares?” (1987) and Margaret Laurence’s “A Place to Stand On” (1976)—to name only a few. Like Walsh, these celebrated Canadian nationalists have become highly recognizable icons of Canadian identity, and thus almost inevitably “enact” the text of Canadian cultural difference.

As used within the discourses of this genre, rhetorical enactment involves more than personal anecdote and more than memoir; it also does more than simply offer the rhetor’s experiences as typical. Instead, the rhetor speaks *for* Canada, as an embodiment of the country’s sensibility and values. Given the tradition in which she is working, as well as the nature of her celebrity in Canada, enactment is an almost inevitable strategy for Walsh, who for many Canadians—and most particularly for the Halifax audience of her Spry Lecture—symbolizes the very cultural ethos her discourse is designed to highlight. The speech thus combines features of Island estrangement, displacement, and singularity not simply as external symbols but in the very person of Walsh herself.

As Walsh recounts her story of growing up, she establishes and personalizes the motif of estrangement from mainstream culture that marks the Islander’s world. Her experience, as presented in the speech, parallels the experience of Newfoundland as it moved from colony to province, and also mirrors the search for legitimacy that continues to characterize the Canadian

mindset. She is thus transformed into a representative figure—a knowing outsider, the Islander who is at once both a loyal nationalist and a cultural alien. “While growing up, me, I, I felt alienated, and I often had the feeling that the real world was taking place somewhere else, that the real things, the important things, were happening somewhere else, and that I was so far away from it that I might never partake of a real life” (“Hymn” 2). These “feelings of alienation” (3) are, as we have seen, characteristic of both the Island experience and the search for Canadian authenticity. They are also a product also of a personal reality that echoes the Islander’s sense of separateness—the estrangement of the symbolic orphan.

Walsh describes her childhood experience of being “raised by . . . two maiden aunts and invalided uncle” who lived in the upstairs of the house while “Mom, Dad, and the siblings lived in the basement and part of the first floor” (“Hymn” 2). The orderly routine of life in the “lace-curtain Irish section of the house” contrasts sharply with the “loud nightmarish quality” of downstairs, where “there was drinking, fornicating, fighting, yelling, screeching, furniture-breaking . . . adultery, thieves, firebugs, police cars, Black Marias, fire trucks, china cabinets thrown over the stairs, teenage pregnancies, suicide attempts, unexplained deaths” (2). Despite its highly singular nature, the tale has a familiar shape: a Canadian shape, the shape of the Island experience. As well, even this scene is something of a Canadian set piece, echoing similar depictions in the Canadian gothic tradition, as well as in Stompin’ Tom’s autobiography *Before the Fame*, in which extreme suffering and deprivation permeate the first half of the book. (Other examples include MacIvor; Moyle; MacDonald; Munro *Who and Lives*; Laurence *The Diviners*).

Walsh clearly intends her tale as an allegory for the Canadian experience. Though she speaks about her own childhood, she insists that the sense of alienation she describes is not merely personal. Instead, she attributes her sense of “dis-ease . . . [to] other factors,” including

colonialism, the producer of “unanchored souls . . . who felt that their here was just an inferior version of somebody else’s there” (“Hymn” 3). Throughout the narrative, she conflates the personal with the political and cultural, and captures the irony at the core of Canadian identity, an irony reflective of the Island sensibility in which community and singularity, belonging and estrangement, are one and the same. It is this irony that helps to authenticate her as quintessential Canadian figure—a knowing outsider, the Islander who is at once both a loyal nationalist and a cultural alien.

I seem to be in the midst here of what I can only describe as a hymn to Canada—which is ironic, I suppose, because I learned at my mother’s knee . . . a great resentment for Canada and all things Canadian. . . . Almost 50 percent of the people in Newfoundland, and I wager all the people in St. John’s, voted against confederation with Canada. . . . We went from being England’s doormat to being Canada’s laughingstock. I was born in 1952, and during my childhood anti-confederation feelings ran very high. There was no *end* to complaining about the shoddiness of Canadian goods, the dour and cheap nature of the Canadian heart (4).

How does someone raised in such a context transform herself into a Canadian icon widely embraced as a representative of the culture? It seems that it is her very experience as an Islander that transforms Walsh into and authenticates her as a spokesperson for Canadian identity. As orphan, as Newfoundlander, as Canadian, Walsh is the quintessential outsider who gives us insight into the meaning of our own experiences. The irony inherent in the outsider’s relationship to the community, and in the Islander’s relationship with “mainland” culture, creates what Kenneth Burke calls “perspective by incongruity”—the throwing of things into relief by

placing them into an unexpected context (Burke 308-311).

The perspective of the quintessential outsider who is doubly an Islander is definitely one-down: “I was glad to be down here looking up. I guess that’s some position I’m used to or something” (“Hymn” 1). However, it is this point of view that lends her the authority of distance, while at the same time authenticating her as a member, by choice, of the culture she comments upon. The Newfoundlander, who has always been the butt of Canadian jokes but who has nevertheless established and maintained a tenacious sense of identity, provides us a view of Canada that we rarely see; we are too used to playing one-down to the Americans, to comparing ourselves, as Margaret Atwood reminds us, “to the wrong thing” (“Canadian-American” 383). For this reason, Walsh can consider the much-discussed question of Canadian identity from what is, for most of us, a fresh perspective:

When I began to tour Canada with Codco I was always surprised at Canada’s insecurity about its identity. Canadians all across the country seemed to be so obviously and so recognizably what they were, Canadians, and they seemed to share many things and have many commonly held beliefs, one of them being an overwhelming certainty that they were all a lot better than us, or so I thought at the time. So as Newfoundlander I’ve never fully understood Canada’s struggle to forge an identity. (“Hymn” 5)

Walsh explains that despite Newfoundland’s “one-down” position in the larger culture, the Island has important lessons to offer a country that has spent “the last hundred years or so . . . [in a] search for a Canadian identity” (3). She celebrates Newfoundland’s determination in “hanging on against all odds” (5) as a model that Canada should emulate. For all its challenges, despite feeling “inferior, left behind, inept, incapable” in the eyes of mainlanders,

Newfoundlanders had a security about their identity that meant they “always knew who we were and where we were” (5). As a result, given the parallels between province and country, Canada’s “insecurity about its identity” is something, says Walsh, that “as a Newfoundlander I’ve never fully understood” (4).

As a Newfoundlander, Walsh also finds satisfaction in the ironic fact that a culture once laughed at as inferior has come to be embraced as the quintessential voice of Canadian resistance. “I mean, in the early seventies you could make a whole elevator of people from Toronto fall down laughing because you said you were from Newfoundland . . . I used to find it embittering beyond belief that people had that idea about Newfoundland” (7). However, over her lifetime—in fact, conflated with her experience—Newfoundland has been transmuted into the source of many of the most powerful voices of Canadian culture—Walsh herself, along with the rest of the *Codco* and *22 Minutes* troupes; CBC commentator and pundit Rex Murphy; Rick Mercer; novelist Wayne Johnston; and more. The satisfaction she derives from this irony is precisely the same sort of satisfaction that Canadians derive from discovering that UN rankings have repeatedly listed Canada—not the United States—as the best place to live in the world (“Facts on Canada”).

There is no small irony also in the fact that people once disdainful of all things Canadian have been transformed into representative Canadian nationalists. Walsh describes how, in the years following Newfoundland’s entry into Confederation in 1949, “anti-confederation feelings ran very high. There was no *end* to complaining about the shoddiness of Canadian goods, the dour and cheap nature of the Canadian heart” (“Hymn” 4). Now, she and her compatriots are the source of many of our best-loved jokes on ourselves and on the “mainstream” American culture that disdains us.

The ironies of Island identity help to explain, in part, both the origins and the appeal of the eccentric folk characterizations for which Walsh is best known. The Island's resistance to mainland influences traditionally produces a kind of exaggerated eccentricity in parodic folk "characters" whose role is to challenge the values of the surrounding dominant culture through a mix of outrageousness, ridicule, and eccentricity. Walsh's comedic acts of resistance are familiar to millions of Canadians from both *Codco* and *This Hour has 22 Minutes*, and have indeed transformed her into exactly such a heroic figure, known for her "perceptive shrewdness" about her own culture (Sinclair 1). As doughnut-eating anti-American nationalist Connie Bloor, who subjects cut-out paper effigies of American politicians and celebrities to a variety of indignities, Walsh provides comedic relief to Canadians who are otherwise powerless to challenge American policies affecting Canada's economic, political, or military position in North America and the world. In the guise of political activist and "Princess Warrior" Marg Delahunty, she takes on Canada's political heavyweights, from the premier of Ontario to the federal finance minister to the prime minister himself, and once told Alberta premier Ralph Klein to "put a cork in it" ("Marg"). In 2003, her mock run for the Liberal leadership in character as Marg, Princess Warrior, garnered wide support among Canadians hungry for some variety in the political landscape. In character as the crudely belligerent but politically sharp Dakey Dunn, Walsh has confronted social and political issues from Ralph Klein's drunken foray into a homeless shelter to George Bush's war on Iraq, and even publicly berated Canada's Foreign Affairs Minister over Canada's ongoing role in North America of "playing 'bum boy' to the Americans" ("Dakey").

These and more of Walsh's eccentric characters are positioned overtly as spokespersons for Canadian cultural and political identity. Through them, and through the very Island resistance that they represent, Walsh has, ironically, achieved what all Islanders seem to seek: validation of

their cultural authenticity through the recognition bestowed on them by the mainland.

As Walsh recounts in her lecture, her having “spent twenty-three of the forty-one years of my life speaking in the voices of a seemingly endless series of loud, opinionated old bags” (“Hymn” 1) has made this figure of the eccentric folk hero second nature to her. These figures, as products of what Lister Sinclair calls her “outspoken perceptive shrewdness” and “certifiable comic genius” (1) have helped to transform Walsh into a Canadian icon. “I could prattle on forever as one of the series of Margs I’ve been playing over the years,” she tells us. “Or I could berate you as Mrs. Dulcey Budgell” (“Hymn” 1-2). She has, and we keep coming back for more.

Despite Walsh’s concern that, in the midst of such characterizations, “sometimes to find my own voice, is, well, hard” (1), we understand that these comic characterizations *are* her own voice. In an important sense, they also capture *our* authentic voice, and give expression to many of our deepest cultural concerns. Indeed, though as Lister Sinclair notes, Walsh’s talents “extend well beyond comedy. . . [and she] is well known for the strength and depth of her work on social issues” (1), it is in these comedic portrayals that her social and political insights are most effectively articulated.

As Walsh notes, Margaret Atwood ends *Survival* with “two questions: have we survived? and if so, what happens after survival?” Naturally, the Island, with its history of “hanging on against all odds,” provides the answer: “I think we have to say yes, we’re staggered, but we’re not knocked down” (“Hymn” 5). And now that we have survived, what then? “Well, I think the Newfoundland answer to that question would be: more survival” (5). It may not be flashy or glamorous, but, insists Walsh, the Canadian symbol of survival is a realistic and even hopeful symbol” (5). Despite the continuing threat of cultural assimilation, its Islandized sensibility has made Canada “a strong country, with a strong sense of identity,” and Walsh insists that “Canada

will continue to fight and struggle to be and express herself as who she is” (7). If Newfoundland, with all its disadvantages, can declare with such tenacity a singular and proud identity, then so, in its parallel situation, can Canada, especially since that distinctive identity is already very much in evidence. As a result, Walsh insists, “it’s time for Canada to stop asking the question: Who are we? I believe that we know who we are” (5). From this perspective, it can hardly be surprising that the Island, with its well-defined boundaries and strong self-definition, has manifested itself as a container for Canadian identity, both overtly through the popularity of Island cultural products, and implicitly through its powerful metaphorical identifications.

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