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Review by Galen Roger Perras, University of Ottawa

I am grateful to Thomas Maddux for inviting me to review this article. I also thank Brian Bow and Adam Chapnick for producing the piece in question. While I can name many works that have discussed the state of Canada-United States relations literature, I am hard-pressed to recall another attempt to bridge the substantial gap that exists between practitioners of History on one hand and Political Science/International Relations on the other hand. I hope this article is a sign of more such interdisciplinary academic scholarship to come in Canada-U.S. relations.

Much of what Bow and Chapnick discuss is not new to me. I specialize in Canada-U.S. military cooperation, I have written extensively on said subject, I teach Canada-U.S. relations at the undergraduate and graduate levels, and I have supervised theses dealing with aspects of the Canada-U.S. relationship. I accept what Bow and Chapnick proclaim, that Canada-U.S. relations are best understood by examining three long-standing overlapping debates: can Canada and the United States be regarded “as paired components of a distinctive North American continental relationship, or as complementary but still individual contributors to a wider Western – or perhaps global community?” (3); can Canada-U.S. relations “be characterized as a partnership between independent equals, mutually constrained interdependence, or a strict hierarchy?” (3); and, can one define that relationship as being characterized more as “cooperation and conflict?” (3). Bow and Chapnick efficiently outline what various authors have said about these three broad debates over the past century, a time of great change, notably America’s rise from a local hemispheric power to international superpower status by 1945.

In the interests of brevity, I will comment on three topics. First, as Bow and Chapnick argue in a footnote on page 3, one problem bedeviling the study of Canada-U.S. relations is the paucity of scholarship by Americans. My Canadian students often complain about a shortage of material written by Americans. My response as to why Americans feel no compelling need to study Canada is two-fold. First, I quote Canadian politician D.C. Abbott’s comments to an American audience in 1944: Canadians, Abbott said, “are a well-behaved people who mind their own business and cause very little trouble. We do not have revolutions, we do not threaten to
take over investments of your citizens in our country, and we pay our bills.” In other words, Canada-U.S. relations is dull as dishwater compared to American interactions with the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany.

To demonstrate my point, let me use a topic I know well, the Ogdensburg Agreement of 1940 between Franklin Roosevelt and Prime Minister W.L.M. King that created the Permanent Board on Defense. While numerous Canadian scholars have addressed this subject, other than Colonel Stanley Dziuban’s dated official history volume in the U.S. Army’s Green Book series, few Americans have. In his 1991 study of Franklin Roosevelt’s wartime presidency, Warren Kimball devoted just five pages to Roosevelt’s interest in Canada during World War Two, an omission Kimball recently rectified in an interesting article about Canada’s place between the British and American “empires” in World War II. The story is little better for other key moments in Canada-U.S. relations history.

Second, I am puzzled by the authors’ failure to address the nationalist Canadian backlash against American influences in the 1960s and 1970s, a backlash that reached across the political spectrum. Charges by American revisionists of global U.S. imperialism resonated in an English-Canada that employed anti-Americanism, anti-imperialism, and pro-Canadianism to identify America as a dangerous “other” to Canada’s “peaceable kingdom.” In 1964, a caustic W.L. Morton, a pro-imperial Canadian historian, notoriously declared that King’s acquiescence to the Ogdensburg Agreement set the stage “for the present condition of Canada, in which the country is irradiated by the American presence that it sickens and threatens to dissolve into cancerous slime.” Twelve years later, another Tory Canadian historian, Donald Creighton fulminated that a “puppet” King in 1940 had “effectively bound Canada to a continental system dominated by the United States” that “largely determined Canadian foreign and defence policy for the next thirty years.” More famously, in 1965, George Grant issued Lament for a Nation, condemning King and his Liberal allies for fervidly embracing continentalism at the cost of the British connection and Canadian nationalism. For leftist scholar Philip Resnick in 1970, Canada had submitted to “continental reorientation” and U.S. domination in 1940. John Warnock’s 1970 book title, Partner to Behemoth: The Military Policy of a Satellite Canada, conveyed his bias. Postulating that Roosevelt had used Ogdensburg to placate Congress for his transfer of fifty

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destroiers to Britain, he argued that it was the only bilateral wartime agency formed by America and another country to possess the appellation “Permanent.” While King felt he had become the treasured “linch-pin” in the Atlantic Triangle, Warnock designated him an American “chore boy.”

Third, I am disconcerted that Canada-U.S. military relations, especially in the mid-twentieth century, are not well addressed by Bow and Chapnick. Returning again to Ogdensburg, one could assume from the scholars cited above that no Canadian academics, on the right or left, liked that security pact or the Canadian Prime Minister who signed it. That is not so. In 1988, the noted political and military historian J.L. Granatstein described Ogdensburg as “wholly beneficial to Canada and Canadian interests,” a step that King had no “option” but to accept given “the military weakness of Great Britain in the summer of 1940.” Though I accept Granatstein’s assertion that King had no option but to accept the security lifeline that Roosevelt threw to him in 1940, I dispute strongly any assertions that an obsequious King grasped that lifeline without thought. Rather, until 1940’s dark crisis came, King had fended off repeated overtures from Roosevelt to tie Canada to American security. After signing the pact, King sought, when possible, to limit American influence, maintain ties to Britain, and pursue a more independent Canadian role within the vaunted North Atlantic Triangle.

Such criticisms aside – scholars have differing emphases and must face the harsh master of word limits when more could be said – I enjoyed the Bow/Chapnick piece, and recommend that others peruse it too. Indeed, historians in particular would gain much by comparing this measured piece to imperial historian Phillip Buckner’s more caustic 1996 review essay, “How Canadian Historians Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Americans!”

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