

AUTHENTICALLY CANADIAN

Craig Silverman

SELLING OUR COUNTRY IN A BOX



Bastix Souvenirs in Montreal offers a plethora of maple-laden products and assorted Canadiana.

I find my Canada in the corner store. When I walk in and see a Smarties box, ketchup chips, Labatt and Sleeman beer, I'm home. There are racks of Canada to be found, an entire nation of goods to be savoured. I can buy our stamps, a ticket for our lottery, our cigarettes that kill our people.

There are thousands of truly Canadian products on display in stores and boutiques across this county. They are familiar to us, but foreign to anyone else. They simply aren't what we present to the world.

When we offer authentically Canadian products to foreigners, we ply them with maple syrup, pass them a stuffed moose or hand them a T-shirt adorned with a maple leaf. Throw in a Hudson's Bay Company blanket and you have the archetype of Canada. Put it all in a softwood lumber box, burn a maple leaf into its top and ship it off: Canada in a box.

Surely there are other authentic Canadian goods that we can hold up as pieces of us. Are we still a just country of wilder-

ness and the brave men who seek to tame it? We love our flag, but must we emboss it on every little salt shaker, key chain, zipper pull and hat? What do people think of when asked to name an authentic Canadian product?

"Nothing," says Erica Kirkland. "Seriously, isn't that the epitome of our country? To the outside world, it is the beaver and maple leaf and maple syrup, and that would be about it."

Kirkland is the editor of *Retail News*, the trade publication of the Canadian Gift & Tableware Association (CGTA), which has more than 1,600 members. Twice a year, they hold the CGTA Gift Show, the largest trade shows in Canada. They feature 1 million square feet of crafts, gourmet foods, kitchenware, stationery, home decor, bath and bedding—and souvenirs.

It is where the makers and sellers of our national goods meet, in part, to decide what we present to the world as us. Every year there are new products, and many fall into the souvenir or col-

Photo: Armelle Bau

WE'RE UNDERSELLING OURSELVES BY MARRYING OUR COUNTRY TO A SELECT FEW ICONS BECAUSE IT'S EASIER TO BOIL THINGS DOWN THAN DEAL WITH COMPLEXITY.

lectibles category. Yet, every year, it seems that our souvenir shops are filled with variations on the same themes: moose, Mounties, maple syrup, maple leaves and hockey.

These items are largely created for tourists, and they continue to fill the shelves because they sell. Their connection to modern-day Canada is slight, but they are symbolic and easy to manipulate into product. This is no more evident than with the 1995 licensing deal that the RCMP signed with Disney, which gave the company full reign over how the image of the Mountie would be portrayed and packaged. Disney wanted the Mountie because it had become something beyond Canada, iconic enough to be licensed for the world. Some view that deal as the death of the Mountie as a Canadian symbol, but the truth is we watered it down long before.

"This is iffy territory," writes Canadian author Douglas Coupland in his book *Souvenir of Canada*. "We have to watch out, because our reservoir of myths is far smaller and far more fragile than those of some other nations. Once the supplies dry up, they dry up. What happens then is that you start recycling myths, which turn into clichés; and before you know it, history has turned into nothing more than clip art."

Or a means to separate tourists from their newfound loonies. We have turned our flag, natural environment, Mounties and other images of Canada into clichés. Worse, we're underselling ourselves by marrying our country to a select few icons because it's easier to boil things down than deal with complexity.

For the products that leave Canada for other markets, the "Canadian made" label only works for foods like maple syrup, salmon or (at one time) beef, as well as hockey players, comedians, beer and, let's be honest, pot. It's not an especially bad list, but it shows a distinct dearth in the kind of "authentic" Canadian goods that we market abroad.

A search for Canadian goods that sell better abroad because they are Canadian turns up nothing but the usual moccasins, maple syrup and "The REAL Canadian Bacon Company"—based in Troy, Michigan.

Coupland's book, and a second version that followed, is a collection of images and photographs—some taken by Coupland and some grabbed from the shelves of supermarkets or other places. The Mountie is there, along with some of our more calcified national iconography, but Coupland makes a more powerful case with his images of vinegar bottles, Robin Hood flour, McCain fiddleheads, rye and stubbies (squat beer bottles).

"This book contains 11 still life photographs I made for several reasons, the simplest one being that I wanted to create images understandable only to Canadians," he writes.

The most powerful image in Coupland's two books comes in *Souvenir of Canada 2*. It is a photograph of what was once a sport sock. Its bleached white colour has turned grey, and parts have

been dyed a dull blue where the colour from a running shoe was sweated onto the sock. There are holes along the bottom of the sock, at the heel and where the back of the sneaker would have hugged the Achilles. On its front is blood, or perhaps rust.

This was the sock that Terry Fox wore on his prosthesis every day of his 1980 Marathon of Hope, and for several months after he ended his journey when the cancer that took his leg spread to his lungs.

I'm not suggesting that we make T-shirts with this sock and mass-produce a line of Terry Fox's sock key chains, although now that I've thought about it, I'd buy one in a second. Things such as this are more meaningful on their own, and not as a consumer product. But it is authentically Canadian—no one could argue with that.

There is room for new icons. The danger is that with each year's new edition of maple leaf key chains, oven mitts, bobble head Mounties and stuffed moose, we take these images further away from us and offer our visitors a more distanced way of taking Canada home.

At the beginning of each school year, Kathryn Young asks students in her "Canadian Identity in the 20th Century" course at the University of Manitoba to list items that come to mind when they think of Canada.

"Some of the things that always come up are maple syrup and the idea of hockey being our national game," she says. "Certainly, the kinds of images that have been constantly put forth over the years have hung on."

Not only have we made these objects powerful images for tourists, we seem to have done it to ourselves, to the exclusion of many others. It's a process that began with World War I and continued through World War II, according to one expert. "Canada in 1867 was a group of people who had very different sensibilities and backgrounds and nothing to unify them," says Anna de Aguayo, a lecturer at Montreal's Dawson College and at the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada. "We left it that way for a long time until the war period. A lot of French troops



in World War I would have a little maple leaf below the British symbol on their uniforms. Some saw that as distinctive—it was not British and it was not French, so they picked it up.”

De Aguayo says many of our iconic Canadian images were appropriated either from the Aboriginal or French communities. These include Inukshuks and beavers, which were a symbol for French fur traders. “When countries shifted from kingdoms, they needed to create a sense of nationalism, and that required rituals and ideas that brought people together,” she says. “Strangely, when Canada was searching for its identity, the objects they picked were things they had to teach people about.”

We seem to have done a good job of that. Perhaps too good—the door to new objects has been locked, or at least closed for a long time. Things are, however, changing on two fronts.

First, the Canadian Tourism Commission (CTC) has rebranded the country as a tourist attraction. Second, albeit much more slowly, there is a growing commitment to selling Canadian-made goods and a shift in the kind of souvenirs we proffer up to visitors. All are in their early stages, but could take hold and update what is seen as an authentic Canadian experience, product or service.

Many would say our vast land is our best product. For a long time, our siren call to tourists consisted of large landscape images. Recently, the CTC ditched this old branding for our country and the accompanying slogan “Discover our true nature” along with it.

“We don’t really promote bringing back home a can of maple syrup, it’s something we are trying to move away from,” says Guy Desaulniers, senior communications advisor for the Canadian Tourism Commission. “We try to step away from the three Ms of moose, Mountie and mountains because Canada has more to offer.”

The CTC now promotes a more experiential branding of Canada—what you can do, how you can have a unique experi-

“WE TRY TO STEP AWAY FROM THE THREE Ms OF MOOSE, MOUNTIE AND MOUNTAINS BECAUSE CANADA HAS MORE TO OFFER.”

ence. This means a focus on certain kinds of tours, spa trips, dining experiences—a whole range of different experiences that are possible in The Great White North. This new movement is less about products and more about uniting our people, land and services as a collective pitch. For example, the CTC plans to push Canadian spas because we have some of the best-trained people working at our facilities, and these facilities are often located in places with an abundance of natural beauty.

“We will still use the mountains and still use moose and Mounties, but in a different way,” Desaulniers explains. “We’ve done research and found that if we show a beauty shot of a mountain and lake to Europeans or anyone else, it gives them the feeling of ‘Yes, it’s beautiful, but what do I do once I get there?’ To them, it looks big and cold. ‘Boring’ and ‘cold’ were words that came up a lot in the research, so we are trying to deviate from that and focus on the whole aspect of, ‘I can pamper and treat myself, and still go out in the outdoors’ and all that good stuff.”

“We want to step away from imagery with no people and show what people can get when they come here,” adds Desaulniers.

Over the last five years, the souvenir industry has slowly evolved away from key chains and other tchotchkes to offer more locally made crafts or home decor items, according to *Retail News’s* Kirkland.

Canadian-made goods are also in vogue with the giftware industry. Every year, *Retail News* publishes its Market Pulse survey based on answers from its members. The 2004 edition had respondents fill in the blank for this sentence: “Next year I’m buying more:”; the answer given by 39 per cent of respondents was Canadian-made goods. It was the first time it had ever made the list. Decorative accessories/home decor was tops at 47 per cent.

Are things really changing in our tourist shops? Retailers are forced to boil their offerings down to a few items that evoke Canada and also draw customers from the U.S., Europe and Asia.

Most Canadian places with a tourism industry will have an area with a concentration of these stores. In Montreal, it is the Old Montreal district with its cobblestone streets and horse-drawn carriage rides. I strolled along Rue Saint-Paul, the focal point for the souvenir trade, and found myself standing behind the counter with Nick, a man originally from Bangladesh who set up his souvenir store more than 20 years ago.

Nick claims not only to be one of the original souvenir retailers in the area, but also ruefully complains that the other stores copy the products he brings in. “You see some designs only in here now,” he says, “but in six months, they will be in all the shops.”

Before he came to Canada in 1985, Nick noticed that the markets in Bangladesh didn’t have any souvenir items and he thought he might open up a store there one day. When he arrived in Montreal, he walked the streets of Old Montreal. He noted a similar lack, so he opened his doors.

Today, according to Nick, there are too many stores and too many suppliers. Many of them seem to offer the same goods, with



Terry Fox’s sock from the Marathon of Hope is a more poignant image of Canada.



the exception of the craft shops that feature regional goods. Those are in line with the trends mentioned by Kirkland—they sell locally made, Canadian products that fit with the home decor trend. As of today, the pure souvenir shops outnumber them.

In the handful of stores I browse, no one seems to be offering anything different. Some display more Aboriginal crafts and clothing, while Nick has an entire section of amber jewellery (not made in Canada).

And everyone has the same standard fare: figurines of hockey-playing moose, bronzed plaques with the map of Canada or a moose head, maple leaf-embellished shot glasses, aprons, oven mitts, shirts and towels. In one store, there are giant beach towels with images of the Canadian wilderness on them. An American woman takes a look at one, fingers the towel and says to her friend, "A beach towel? I don't think we'll be going to the beach up here." Boring and cold indeed.

There are all manner of stuffed moose, some in biker jackets, others sitting tandem in a canoe or bobsled. Every store has a maple syrup section and a cabinet of Aboriginal art with small Inukshuk statues or jade carvings of polar bears. There are bumper stickers and signs that proclaim "Moose Crossing," and spoons, mugs, hats and T-shirts as far as the eye can see. Many items carry a "Made in Canada" sticker or seal, but others come without any designation, meaning they were likely mass-produced in China or Taiwan. (The Canadian government reportedly ordered its Maple Leaf flags and lapel pins from a company that manufactures them in China.)

There are also many attempts to combine these elements into one item. In one store I find the holy grail of Canadiana: a bobble head beaver dressed in a Mountie uniform, holding a hockey stick. At the bottom of the figure, next to the letters "RCMP," is a red maple leaf. It is almost too much to comprehend in one glance.

The store employees tell me that Europeans still love the moose and beaver, while Americans are more prone to T-shirts and shot glasses. Maple syrup works across the board, particularly with Asian and European visitors. They know their trade, and, as corny as it all seems to a Canadian, it sells.

"It is always the moose and the colour red," says Hussein, as he stands behind the counter of one store. "I don't think things will change. When tourists think of the moose and red and maple leaf, that's Canada."

Joe Nykoluk runs a souvenir store and distribution business out of Winnipeg. He prefers to go by the name JO'Canada and has committed himself to selling only items made in Canada.

Contacted by phone, Nykoluk provides some insight into the souvenir trade. "I found a need for more Canadian-made souvenir items, as opposed to buying Canadian key chains or pins that said 'Made in Taiwan' or 'Made in China,'" he says. "It's going to get even tougher as time goes on because more and more stuff is made in China and very little is made here."

I ask Joe what he would recommend to someone looking for a Canadian souvenir. "Maple syrup is still number one," he says. "Now, after maple syrup, I guess you'd go with a nice Inuit carving, but that's more expensive, and, of course, salmon—but a lot of times you can't take that with you."

At the end of my Montreal stroll, I find myself in Nick's store, wanting to purchase a keepsake of my souvenir hunt. I decide I want something classically stereotypical. I head for the key chains, but Nick beats me there. "Now I give you a souvenir," he says, smiling.

Nick spins the rack, sending the maple leaves, beavers, moose and Canadian penny key chains spinning. He reaches down, plucks an item, tears off the price tag and hands it to me. It is a turquoise rubber key chain, too large for everyday use. On the front is a happy moose, decked out in full hockey gear and wearing a jersey that reads "Canada!" A giant red maple leaf is behind him. The moose's eyes are locked on the puck at his skates, and he is preparing to make a wicked slapshot, perhaps into a net guarded by a vodka-toting, caviar-eating, Russian bear with a red star emblazoned on his jersey.

"For you," he says.

I have to admit, it is the perfect souvenir.