**All Quiet on the Northern Front**

Josh Freed .

In the American film *True Believer,* actor

James Woods, playing a lawyer, asks his

assistant to track down two witnesses. She

tells him that one is dead, the other has

moved to Canada.

... "Same thing," Woods says

ironically, then tells her to forget it.

Only days after seeing the film, I was

reading Britain's *Manchester Guardian* and

noticed a story about Wellington, the capital

city of New Zealand. It was described as:

"A place so boring even the Canadians seem

interesting."

Neither remark was really unusual.

They were just routine spears flung 'into the

tattered hide of the Canadian, a maligned,

insulted and allegedly dull creature said to

be only slightly more interesting than the

mollusk.

An Ottawa columnist reports being told

that "one Canadian is as boring as

three Swiss or five Belgians."

A British survey asks people what

comes to mind when they hear the word

"Canada." The answer: "rocks."

The respected *Economist* magazine

pronounces us "more boring than all other

nations, except Singapore.”

' What is going on?' Am I just sensitive

or are we really a nation of limp f1apjacks -

the polyester of the International set.

Is this the image of the dull Canadian?

Personally, I think it's a bum rap-the

result of living next to the most opinionated,

loudmouthed nation on earth. I noticed the

difference again recently on a trip to Costa

Rica, where most tourists are from the U.S.

or Canada. The two groups look identical,

but you can locate the Americans the

moment you walk into a room - by their

sound.

"The skiing in my state is absolutely

*unreal,"* a young American will be saying as

if through a megaphone. "I mean we are

talking mega-skiing here, totally merciless ...

AWESOME."

He is describing an obscure hill in Idaho;

barely larger than Montreal’s Mount Royal.

Yet ask the Canadians at the next

table about skiing the Rockies and they'll

reply: .

"Well, it depends on the season. It

can be quite impressive in winter - if it's not

too crowded, or too foggy, or too wet.".

Canadians are a nation of qualifiers,

ever cautious, obsessed with accuracy and

truth. Our national image pays heavily for

this trait, especially when compared to our

larger than life neighbours. Unlike us,

Americans talk to entertain, with little

concern for truth. Chicago is "the greatest

town on earth." The Philadelphia Flyers are

the "world champions." Their corner

restaurant makes "the best French food

you'll ever taste."

Who can possibly keep up? As a

journalist I'm aware of the difference

between us every time I cross the border to

cover a story.

Whether I Interview a U.S. senator or a

gas station attendant, Americans reply In

colourful "clips"-punchy made-for television

anecdotes fired out in machinegun-

like bursts.

Not us. Put a Yankee and a Canuck

at a hotel fire, and they describe different

events.

REPORTER: What happened?

AMERICAN: It was awesome. I heard a

rumble, then KAPOW!!--there was

this incredible explosion-flames

everywhere! It was like hell, only

worse.

CANADIAN: I heard the sound of the

explosion. well actually, I didn't know

it was an explosion at the time. It was

more like ...a .. *thumping* sound. \_

REPORTER: *(eager for dramatic clip for*

*news):* What then?

CANADIAN: Well, I put on my bathrobe to

investigate. I went downstairs, and

there was ... well couldn't see the fire, but

I certainly saw a good deal of smoke.

REPORTER: *(desperate):* How did you

*feel?* Weren't you scared?

CANADIAN: Ah ... It's not really for me to

answer. I wasn't in the best place to

see the fire. My wife had a better

angle, didn't you, dear?

WIFE *(in bathrobe, popping awake):* 0h no,

not really dear. You were in a better

position than me. Really; I was

looking after Nathan.

CANADIAN: No, no dear ... I'm almost

sure you were closer than I was

*(reporter rushes* off *to find more*

*Americans staying at hotel.)*

After several years of cross-continent

reporting I've come to the conclusion that

finding clips, like growing grapes, has a lot

to do with the sun. The further north you go

the leaner the harvest. Take the American

South. People there talk in a slow drawl, but

invariably deliver pearls; like:

"Son, your reasoning is about as

bumpy as a moose's rump.';

Hit New York and It's all hype.

People's hands wave about like conductor's

and superlatives are the only form of

adjective. Everything is "stupendous ... unique... divine."

As you approach the border, good clip

fades as fast as sunshine. Even in northern

Maine you can already hear the earnest

Canadian-tones of an Edmund Muskle; by

the time you reach Montreal or Toronto,

lively clips must be extracted like molars,

unwilling to leave the mouth.

The hands have stopped moving.

Hyperbole has vanished. Adjectives are

scarce-replaced by qualifiers like

"somewhat" and possibly."

The linguistic modesty is most visible

in the heart of Canada-the far north-where

people ration words like wood for a fire.

Typical is a White horse musher I

interviewed during a dogsled race several

years ago. He was about to leave for three

weeks alone in the bush and I tried vainly to

get a dramatic quote out of him.

-- Are you worried about the weather?

I asked.

-- Nope.

-- But storms can be dangerous when

you're alone? You could die.

-- Yep.

-- What about your dogs? Isn't it tough

on them?

-- I haven't asked 'em.

This northern silence may have

meaning. On one icy journey in the north, I

pestered my Inuit guide David with a litany

of. questions: Why did he seem so

comfortable in the cold? How come his

fingers didn't freeze when he took his

gloves off to work? Why wasn't he

shivering-like me?

After a series of patient, laconic

replies, he offered some unexpected advice:

"Words take energy, Josh. They burn up

heat. If you talk less, you'll be more warm."

It was the last thing he said to me for

hours. Reluctantly, I was forced to take his

advice, and the quieter I became, the

warmer I got.

Perhaps it is from here - this

Darwiniah need for silence - the Canadians

have evolved. And developed our

undeserved reputation as dull.

Wrapped in thick parkas, toques pulled

over our ears, brains busily thinking about

how to start the car, we are less generous of

breath, less quick to expound than our

southern neighbours.

It's not that we're boring. We've just

got better things to do than talk about the

weather. Like survive it.