Timelessness and Historicity of the Game in Ken Dryden’s Book
The Game

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In 2003, John Wiley Ltd. republished Ken Dryden’s The Game as a special “20th Anniversary Edition.” Originally published by Macmillan of Canada, the 1983 work has become somewhat of a “classic” piece of literature ostensibly concerning hockey, one of its most celebrated players, and the Montreal Canadiens franchise. It is an insider look at ice hockey à la Ken Dryden, five-time Vezina trophy winner as the National Hockey League’s best goaltender and six-time member of Stanley Cup–winning teams. Dryden states in his introductory paragraphs:

It was a book I couldn’t have written while I played. It needed time. As it is with a game, I needed to wait for lifelong, career-long feelings to settle and sort themselves out. I needed to distance myself from things I had long since stopped seeing, to see them again. In the end, it turned out to be the kind of wonderful, awful, agonizing, boring, thrilling time others have described writing to be. One of those things we call “an experience.”

It is my contention that the power and allure of what Dryden has written are derived from his perceptive, and, in many ways, from timeless insights into the whole concept of the game. His book’s title fits the contents. It is not, in fact, a book about hockey, a celebrated team in hockey, or an era of hockey. Nor is it even any kind of autobiographical reminiscence of Dryden’s playing time (the 1970s) in the NHL. Instead, it is a rare and very sophisticated glimpse into the vibrant meaning of game as it is represented in one of game’s “outer cloaks,” the sport of ice hockey. The purpose of this article then is to deconstruct Dryden’s The Game by using it as text for my analysis of the game concept. The book is, I believe, one of those subtle treatises that sneaks inside its readers’ bones because it speaks to one of life’s great metaphors, the game of life, compressed Zip-file-like into one person’s learning from his experiences and introspections in and through a literal game.

There is a kind of Canadian imperative about ice hockey—the sport “invented” in Canada and a sport that eventually became legislated as one of Canada’s two national sports. Concerning the significance of hockey in Canadian culture, there

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are two images I wish to discuss briefly to provide some context for Dryden’s text. The first is an Internet-posted image called Canadian Gothic; it is a transformed version of Grant Wood’s famous 1930 painting, American Gothic. Many variations of Wood’s American Gothic exist, including a parody of former U.S. President Bill Clinton and his wife, Hillary.\(^5\) Just as American Gothic draws us to ponder the sour and dour rural couple, so too does Canadian Gothic draw us to marvel at its juxtaposition of the same facials against the backdrop of one of the most well known pieces of Canadian architecture, Maple Leaf Gardens – Anglophone Canada’s hockey shrine in Toronto. Further, the old man in the picture holds an Easton hockey stick instead of a pitchfork. It just seems such a perfect image to imply Canada’s hockey heraldry using an American classic,\(^6\) and it gets inside the viewer’s skin immediately.

The second image is perhaps more obviously and directly germane to this analysis of Dryden’s book and its enduring message as a mellifluous paean to the game of hockey. The image I have in mind is one that appeared on the front jacket cover of the book The Death of Hockey,\(^7\) published about eleven years before the original edition of Dryden’s The Game. The image is one of a gray-toned hand forcefully squeezing a dark red drop of blood out of a black hockey puck. It is difficult to imagine a more apropos and salient picture that so accurately embodies this book’s text. In the first chapter, entitled “The Canadian Specific,” the authors proclaim that:

Like the ball games of the Mayan Indians of Mexico, worshipped because the arc of the kicked ball was thought to imitate the flight of the sun and moon across the heavens, hockey captures the essence of the Canadian experience in the New World. In a land so inescapably and so inhospitably cold, hockey is the dance of life, an affirmation that despite the deathly chill of winter we are alive.\(^8\)

Following this first section, the authors turn their investigative and analytical attention to the ways and means that the Canadian life-blood has been squeezed out of hockey by such pernicious forces as the media, NHL player monopolies, commercialization to extremes, professionalization, and professional impact at all levels of the sport. The Death of Hockey and this haunting cover image formed an important in-depth look at the factors inherent in reshaping the sport of hockey. Thus, Canadian Gothic and the blood-squeezed puck graphically symbolize the significance of the sport of hockey in the Canadian national imagination.\(^9\)

Dryden’s book goes deeper into the fabric of hockey, I suggest, than any cultural representations, national enactments, or insightful analyses (such as The Death of Hockey or the more recent Hockey Night in Canada: Sport, Identities and Cultural Politics\(^10\)) of the sport. What Dryden does is take the reader outside of the “Canadian specific” and into the game itself. There is at least one important thematic precedent to Dryden’s work, that of Jack London’s 1905 novel about boxing, The Game.\(^11\) London was an avid boxer and devout student of the sport. His book was first serialized in Metropolitan Magazine (April-May 1905). The story was heavily critiqued as unreal because its protagonist, Joe, is hit by a punch, falls to the canvas, and dies as a result of the fall. Regardless of its storyline, what is significant here is that London’s attention to the game of boxing foreshadows