In a recent paper comparing the historical traditions and national characteristics of Canada and the United States, the sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset writes, "There is much to be gained, both in empirical and analytic terms, from a systematic comparative study of Canada and the United States. They have many of the same ecological and demographic conditions, approximately the same level of economic development, and similar rates of upward and downward social mobility. And alongside the obvious distinctiveness of francophone Quebec, anglophone Canadians and Americans have much in common in cultural terms as well. Yet, although overall these two people probably resemble each other more than any other two nations on earth, there are consistent patterns of difference between them. To discover and analyze the factors which create and perpetuate such differences among nations is one of the more intriguing and difficult tasks in comparative study" (1986:114). For cross-cultural gerontologists who follow Lipset's lead, Canada and the United States are ideal countries in which to identify and explain differences in the development and implementation of social policies and the participation of their respective elderly citizens.

As Eloise Rathbone-McCuan and Betty Havens assert, to date there has been almost no comparative gerontological research on Canada and the United States, although of late differences between the health care systems have received a good deal of attention (cf. Kane and Kane 1985). "To encourage and facilitate cross-national gerontological activities" (p. 286), the editors commissioned authors to write papers about eight "selected topics that provided vital points of comparison between the two countries" (p. 3). Only for the topic of demography, however, are data about both countries included in one chapter. For the other seven topics, two authors - one from Canada, one from the United States - were asked (apparently using the same outline) to write chapters independently. In this lies the weakness of the volume. To make meaningful
cross-national comparisons while focusing exclusively on one nation is akin to shadow boxing. After reading both chapters on a topic, the reader is left with the task of drawing cross-national comparisons, in most cases with some difficulty because the data included in each are not comparable because they were "independently produced" (p. 2). Nevertheless, many of the chapters in the book are of interest in their own right and may, as the authors hope, spur scholarly and applied cross-national work.

Leroy Stone and Susan Fletcher in their chapter on demography ask the reader in comparing the United States and Canada to keep in mind "the picture of a large elephant standing beside a deer." (Others might choose different animals to make this point, e.g., a cat and a mouse, albeit a wily one). They point out that in 1985, "there were more Americans at least 65 years old than there were people of all ages in Canada" (p. 9). Although this difference in size seems significant for understanding national "perspectives," the ramifications of it are not addressed in large part because comparisons are most conveniently made (and understood) using proportions. In their chapter, the authors advocate by illustration that demographers in both countries pay less attention to the proportion of seniors in the population and more attention to the disparate characteristics of particular cohorts that enter and move through the senior ranks.

The topical area labeled "Social Policy" is exclusively about income security in old age. Robert Hudson focuses on federal legislation and charts the changes from 1935 through the Reagan Administration while Myles uses a political economy perspective which makes it possible to include the contributions of the private sector as well. Whether this is due to Myles' being a sociologist and Hudson's being a political scientist or to their respective nationalities (as Lipset might suggest) – or to both – remains an intriguing question. Myles presents a table of income sources for older Canadians, including private pensions and savings, and evaluates their combined success at meeting the two goals of income security and preventing poverty. He concludes that the goal of income security has not been met and the goal of preventing poverty is met for most couples but not for single individuals – most of whom are widowed women, for whom the poverty rate was still 57.5 percent in 1983. After reviewing the recent debate in Canada over pension reform, he concludes that "the result was to reinforce the economic divisions that had generated the debate in the first place: better pensions for those covered by private plans and nothing for the majority who are not. Even more remarkable was the success of the new government in expanding Canada's welfare state for the rich" (p. 50). After tracing the history of the enactment of various public policies that have benefited the aged, Hudson concludes, "The aged have fared relatively well in the context of the truncated American welfare state ... and have been less adversely affected by recent program cuts than other populations" (p. 66). Why the Canadian elderly apparently are "ahead" of the US elderly with respect to health care and "behind" with respect to income security seems an important question for cross-national research.