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History as Biography

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History as Biography

Students of history have long debated whether men (and women) shape events or *vice versa*. Carlyle claimed that "the history of the world is but the biography of great men" and Emerson agreed that "there is properly no history; only biography". Tolstoi, however, believed that "great men — so called — are but the labels that serve to give a name to an event". Such observations about the significance of biography come to mind when one is confronted by a book of 1,092 pages, containing 586 biographies written by 382 contributors. Yet there can be no doubt that the biographical approach provides one of the most fascinating and illuminating approaches to history, and even a casual survey of Volume XI of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1982) reveals much about 19th century Canada.

People who died in the 1880s — the scope of the present volume — were generally at the peak of their careers from the 1850s onwards, so this volume paints a portrait of Canada at a critical phase in its development. Vancouver Island and British Columbia were evolving from colonies into a province which experienced a gold rush and the establishment of new communities and new resource industries such as coal. On the prairies the fur trade continued, but patterns were changing as settlement, the North West Mounted Police, rebellion, and the creation of Manitoba heralded new days. In Ontario, Quebec and the Atlantic Provinces, responsible government was only recently established and church-state relations were being hotly debated in controversies over education, clergy reserves, and ultramontanism. It was a period of complex and increasingly paralytic political manoeuvering in the Province of Canada, which resulted ultimately in constitutional deadlock and the drive for Confederation. This was also a time of enormously significant economic development, as Canada not only grew rapidly but also entered the railway age and increasingly integrated its economy with that of the United States. Alongside Confederation, the pivotal event of the period, the dominant theme was the establishment of the institutions of government, religion, education, agriculture, charity, literature and the arts, business and industry, as well as the social problems of a developing society. The Atlantic Provinces enjoyed their Golden Age of wind, wood and sail, underwent the traumatic debate over Confederation, and began the controversial process of economic integration with Canada. Finally, it was a period both of dramatic westward expansion, which saw the emergence of a continental union, and of increasingly ferocious sectarian and ethnic strife which seemed to threaten the very survival of that union.

Perhaps inevitably, most of the people in this book are either businessmen or politicians, and very often the line separating them is a fine one indeed. There are, for example, Isaac Buchanan, the Upper Canadian merchant, William Gooderham, who founded the Toronto distillery in 1837, and Edward Gurney,

the manufacturer. There are also Charles Brydges, who built the Intercolonial Railway, and L-A Senécal, who became "the most important French Canadian capitalist of his time", and perhaps the most corrupt as well, though the competition was severe. Symbolizing the period, there is Sir Hugh Allan, the Montreal magnate perhaps unfairly but best known to history as author of the Pacific Scandal, of whom Brian Young and Gerald Tulchinsky, damning with faint praise, conclude that he "was not . . . more corrupt than fellow Canadian businessmen or old political friends such as Cartier or Macdonald".

Among politicians, there is the unlikeable but somewhat pathetic J.E. Cauchon who, according to Andrée Désilets, "beyond doubt . . . knew how to reconcile his principles with his interests". After a lifetime of feverish activity and a lengthy political career designed to advance his business interests, he retired from the lieutenant-governorship of Manitoba to die in poverty. There are William Cayley, pillar of the Upper Canadian Tory establishment, and Letellier de Saint-Just, for many years the *bête noire* of the Tories in Quebec, and P.J.O. Chauveau, the largely-forgotten but industrious and rather impressive first premier of Quebec after Confederation. There are J.C. Dent and Christopher Dunkin, and William A. Foster of Canada First, whom David Gagan describes as "perhaps the most original intellect" in the movement. Most formidable of all, although the fact is not really reflected in William Ormsby's essay, there is Sir Francis Hincks, a key figure in the formation of the Baldwin-Lafontaine coalition of the 1840s, sometime Premier of Canada, and an important figure in the creation of the Grand Trunk Railway. Others include William McMaster, founder of the Canadian Bank of Commerce and of what later became McMaster University, Alexander Morris, J.A. Mousseau, John Norquay, who fought John A. Macdonald's railway policies in the 1880s, John Henry Pope, who recommended them, and Sir John Rose, who helped to finance them, and L-V Sicotte, a moderate reformer in Quebec at a time when there was little room for moderates in that province. And finally there were the tragic Louis Riel, about whom Lewis Thomas has written a very balanced essay, and the Indian leaders Crowfoot, Big Bear, Poundmaker and Sitting Bull, all of whom emerge in these pages as honourable men struggling to cope with an impossible situation.

The *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* does not confine itself to businessmen and politicians. There are religious leaders ranging from the indomitable Bishop Bourget of Montreal to the Reverend David Rine, a Methodist minister and briefly popular temperance lecturer, whose career ended abruptly in 1878 when he was charged with indecently assaulting a 15-year-old serving girl. There are literary figures such as Isabella Crawford and Susanna Moodie; there are educators, most notably Egerton Ryerson, founder of the Ontario school system, whose influence in Canadian education was almost incalculable; and there are others in law, medicine and the arts as well, though one cannot help but

be struck by how few the entries in these fields are and how relatively insignificant these people were.[1] That is not a criticism of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, of course, but a comment on 19th century Canada.

There are also obscure but colourful characters such as Reginald Birchall, also known as Lord Frederick Somerset, a disreputable Englishman who surfaced in Woodstock, Ontario, in the 1880s, cheated local tradesmen by posing as an aristocrat, then swindled British investors by selling shares in a horse farm that didn't exist. He capped his career by murdering one of these investors who had come over to investigate, and was hanged at Woodstock after a sensational trial in 1890. It is not clear why this particular murderer was selected for inclusion in the volume. Less obscure and considerably more reputable was Josiah Henson, a fugitive slave who arrived in Upper Canada in 1830 and founded a black settlement near Dresden. He became the spokesman for Canada's growing black population and was long regarded as the prototype for Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom.

Inevitably, readers of *Acadiensis* will be most interested in the biographies of Atlantic Canadians. Of the 586 entries, 171 are of people from this area: 43 from New Brunswick, 39 from Newfoundland and Labrador, 65 from Nova Scotia, and 24 from Prince Edward Island. Among the politicians are four Fathers of Confederation: J.H. Gray and J.C. Pope of Prince Edward Island, J.H. Gray of New Brunswick, and W.A. Henry of Nova Scotia. There are also anti-Confederates such as William Annand of Nova Scotia, whom David Sutherland unkindly but no doubt accurately describes as "a mediocrity who lived in exciting times", Edward Palmer of Prince Edward Island, who seems to have opposed every proposed change during his political career, and A.W. McLelan of Nova Scotia, although the latter became a supporter of the National Policy and served in the Macdonald governments of the 1880s. C.M. Wallace's very interesting essay on Albert Smith of New Brunswick treats him more sympathetically and rates him rather more highly than has generally been the case in the past.

Unfortunately, at least one biography is not quite up-to-date in its research. Writing on Henry William Smith, a Nova Scotia anti-Confederate, John Grant repeats the old claim that 18 of the 19 Nova Scotia members elected to the House of Commons in 1867 were antis. This writer demonstrated in an article published in *Acadiensis* in 1972 and recently republished[2] that the member elected in Cape Breton County was claimed by both sides on election night and in fact supported Macdonald and Tupper when he got to Ottawa. The same was

1 Listed by category, there are only 10 architects, 31 artisans, 27 people under "Arts", 15 engineers, 6 labour organizers, 37 doctors, and 20 scientists. Of the 586 entries, 25 are Indians, 23 are women, and 3 are blacks.

2 Donald Macgillivray and Brian Tennyson, eds., *Cape Breton Historical Essays* (Sydney, College of Cape Breton Press, 1980), pp. 54-65.

true of Charles Campbell of Victoria County.

Atlantic regional businessmen in this period, not surprisingly, are usually shipowners, such as Charles Bowring of Newfoundland, and Bennett Smith of Nova Scotia, described as "one of the largest shipowners and one of the wealthiest and best known men in the Maritime provinces". Clergymen include Anglican Bishop Hibbert Binney of Halifax and Silas Tertius Rand, the Baptist clergyman and missionary who spent his life among the Micmacs trying to convert them from Catholicism. He failed utterly, as he himself recognized, but his life was hardly wasted. He invented a written alphabet for the Micmac language, compiled a dictionary, and collected many traditional stories and myths which might otherwise have been lost.

Other Maritimers of interest include James Ross, first president of the resuscitated Dalhousie College in 1863, who built it from a floundering little school into a significant university. There is also Robert Patterson, a fugitive slave who arrived in New Brunswick in 1852, became prominent in the anti-slavery movement there and founded an "oyster saloon" which became "the most popular establishment of its kind in Saint John". There is Christianne Morris, a well-known Micmac artist, the model for many other artists and photographers anxious to record something of what they believed to be a dying race, and "one of Halifax's most interesting citizens in the 19th century". And finally there is Anna Swan, a Nova Scotia giantess who toured with P.T. Barnum for several years before marrying and settling down with an American giant in Ohio.

What kind of a portrait of Canada at mid-century emerges from this wide-ranging collection of biographies? Clearly it was a harsh land of individualists where rags-to-riches stories (and sometimes riches-to-rags, as well) were common. It was a country where prominence was most likely to be achieved in business, politics or the church, or any combination of the three. It was a land increasingly dominated by its central region, though that region was itself sharply divided along religious, ethnic, and geographical lines. It was a land dominated by people of British or French descent; there are no European or other immigrants, the few Indians represent what appeared to be a dying race, and the three blacks are distinct curiosities. It was a land dominated by men; the few prominent women are generally writers or nuns. Lastly, it was very much a middle-class society; the pursuit of wealth was the primary activity, alongside the pursuit of power, and it is clear that few labour leaders, social workers or scholars achieved prominence in this period.

This is the seventh volume of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* to be published, and the editors and contributors are to be congratulated on their success in maintaining the standard of previous volumes. The *DCB* will long stand as the definitive biographical reference work in Canadian history and it is a project in which the University of Toronto Press and Canadian scholars may justly take pride. Whether one sides with Carlyle or Tolstoi on the place of

biography in the study of history, there will be no dispute over the value and readability of this volume.

BRIAN TENNYSON

Canadian Medical History: Diagnosis and Prognosis

It is not uncommon for historians to congratulate themselves on the emergence and strength of social history in Canada, but among the fields which have remained undeveloped and generally overlooked by Canadian historians is the history of Canadian medicine. Until recently most of the literature in this field was the work of amateur historians, who brought considerable proficiency and personal commitment to the study of medical history. They studied the lives of individual doctors and traced the growth of the medical profession through changes in medical treatment, the acceptance of physicians as professionals, and the establishment of medical institutions. The results were informative, but the literature tended to be uncritical, unanalytical, and viewed medicine as consisting only of orthodox physicians and the health care facilities they controlled. The history of medicine was seen as a case study of progress. Most of the people who were writing were doctors with a vested interest in seeing their profession in a favourable light and having others share that view. After all, they had devoted their lives to it, and many had made sacrifices to do so. Their vision of progress was a part of their daily lives as practicing physicians; what use was medicine if you could not see improvement (progress) in your patients? While much of the interpretation in their work can be criticized, the amateurs were the only ones doing research and writing in medical history. Certainly historians were not interested and have remained uninterested until very recently.

Compared to the amateurs, historians approach the history of medicine differently. If physicians had a vested interest in bolstering the medical profession, professional historians seem to have a vested interest in revisionist history, that is, in debunking standard interpretations. Also, the idea of progress has long since had its heyday in historical writing; historians now accept a less linear view which assumes that there is a give-and-take in most activities and that what is progress in one area may not be in another. For them, science is not an absolute but as much a product of the social climate as anything else. Although professional historians are now enthusiastically delving into medical history, they are often prone to dismiss the careful research which has gone before as antiquated. As a result the amateurs are feeling a trifle threatened by and jealous of the new usurpers. This is unfortunate, because each has much to offer the other. The expertise among the so-called amateurs is astounding. They have lived with their material in a way an historian cannot. On the other hand,