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Résumé de l'article

Je soutiens que le livre d'Elsbeth Heaman réalise précisément ce que Michael Bliss espérait lorsqu'il a écrit « Privatizing the Mind: The Sundering of Canadian History, the Sundering of Canada. » Il s'agit d'un ouvrage lisible, engagé sur le plan politique, qui prend au sérieux la tâche des historiens canadiens d'expliquer qui « nous » sommes, où « nous » avons été, et où « nous » pourrions aller, sans créer de mythe ou homogénéiser ce que « nous » pourrions être.

Canadian History Unsundered: Reflections on Elsbeth Heaman's *Tax, Order, and Good Government*

CARMEN NIELSON

Abstract

I argue that Elsbeth Heaman's book achieves precisely what Michael Bliss had hoped for when he wrote "Privatizing the Mind: The Sundering of Canadian History, the Sundering of Canada." This is readable, politically-engaged scholarship that takes seriously Canadian historians' task of explaining who "we" are, where "we" have been, and where "we" might be going, without mythologizing or homogenizing who that "we" might be.

Résumé

Je soutiens que le livre d'Elsbeth Heaman réalise précisément ce que Michael Bliss espérait lorsqu'il a écrit « Privatizing the Mind: The Sundering of Canadian History, the Sundering of Canada. » Il s'agit d'un ouvrage lisible, engagé sur le plan politique, qui prend au sérieux la tâche des historiens canadiens d'expliquer qui « nous » sommes, où « nous » avons été, et où « nous » pourrions aller, sans créer de mythe ou homogénéiser ce que « nous » pourrions être.

In a defense of *Tax, Order, and Good Government* that I wrote for CHA Reads in May 2018, I argued that Heaman had written the *Articles of Peace* to end the History Wars. In Canada, the history wars were fought on two related fronts, national versus identity politics, and political versus social history. The question, to put it simply, was: should historians write political histories that informed citizens about what it has meant to be Canadian, or write social histories that showed the diversity, difference, and inequality of experience amongst "the people" in Canada? Heaman's book is one that, surely, both sides can agree on. *TOGG* is a national history that demonstrates that the nation is still a useful category of analysis, while showing the importance of studying both the local and the transnational. This is also a book that writes about identity politics, inequity, and social justice as if they matter, as if they too are integral to political and economic histories.¹⁶

After first reading *TOGG*, I went back and reread Michael Bliss's "Privatizing the Mind: The Sundering of Canadian History, the Sun-

dering of Canada,” which was often cited with other jeremiads about the apparent demise of national histories, like J.L. Granatstein’s infamous *Who Killed Canadian History?*.¹⁷ I hadn’t read “Privatizing the Mind” since graduate school and, knowing that Bliss was Heaman’s Ph.D. supervisor and that he had recently passed away, I wondered what he would have made of the book. I came to see that over time and likely due at least in part to graduate students like me who were prone to set up academic straw-men, the article had been caricatured and misunderstood. In fact, Bliss had predicted and worried about just such a misunderstanding, and so he clarified:

In calling for a return to national history, I am not advocating nationalist history; I am not advocating the development or upholding of historical mythology; I am not advocating the advancement of a Canadian “identity” which is not there. Above all, I am not advocating the limited, restructured sense of Canada as a public community that was implicit, often explicit, in the national history written by Creighton, Lower, Underhill, and [others] ... We should renew our appreciation of the history of Canada, yes, but we must not do it at the cost of leaving out those Canadians who were excluded from the old history and whose integration into our historical and national consciousness is the finest achievement of our history-writing since the 1960s.¹⁸

Heaman’s book achieves precisely what Bliss had hoped for when he wrote this: readable, politically-engaged scholarship that takes seriously Canadian historians’ task of explaining who “we” are, where “we” have been, and where “we” might be going, without mythologizing or homogenizing who that “we” might be.

Bliss attributed declining interest in the “big questions” of Canadian identity to rising levels of national disunity and political uncertainty, which in the direct aftermath of the failure of the Meech Lake Accord seemed at an unprecedented high-point. What Bliss could not see were the forces already at work that would pose far greater challenges to “the nation” as such, namely, the tremendous uptick in rates of capital liquidity, economic globalization on a massive scale, and the usurpation of national independence by multinational corporatizations, not to mention an impending climate crisis that makes a mockery of national borders and the nation as a meaningful site of political power.

All of which, more than ever, begs the question: why study Canada at all? This question has been most forcefully pressed by Ian McKay in his profoundly important article, "The Liberal Order Framework: a Prospectus for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History," in which he suggested that by studying the uptake, integration, transformation, and acclimatization of liberal political philosophies, as well as resistance to these, in the places that would eventually constitute the nation of Canada, historians could capture what was both specific to these places as well as — and perhaps more importantly — not at all unique.¹⁹ Heaman has achieved this brilliantly. By bringing the state back in, historicizing an intellectual, economic, and political paradigm with which we still grapple, and by writing a political history that, as she says, "sees both a top-down state and a bottom up one that people continually constructed for themselves" (463), this book transcends the national while also keeping the nation directly in its iron sights.

Only Heaman could have written this book, which is what makes it such a singular outcome. She has poured into it all of her accumulated expertise in British, American, and Canadian political economy and intellectual history, histories of science and medicine, consumption and exhibition, social welfare policy, state formation, and the public sphere. I can think of no other historian who could pull off a mash-up of Thucydides and Nickelback, or compare Canadian tax regimes' aesthetic and philosophical orientations to anti-realist art, H.G. Wells' novels, and the game of Monopoly. And, like the best of scholarship everywhere, Heaman's book offers such significant shifts of interpretation and inflects so many conventional historiographies that a wide field for new scholarship has been opened up. We'll understand the true import of *TOGG* only in hindsight, after a generation of scholars has mined its depths.

In the same vein as philosophers who think that all other disciplines are just doing philosophy badly, this book has convinced me that we've been doing tax history all along, but since we didn't know it, we've ended up doing it badly. I can illustrate with examples from my own work. My book, *Private Women and the Public Good: Charity and State Formation in Hamilton, Ontario, 1846–93* is fundamentally about how a group of women navigated municipal politics and a political public sphere to organize and deliver social welfare services to the local poor.²⁰ They encountered both support and resistance from City Hall and I needed to understand on what grounds municipal

politicians made their decisions. I spent a lot of time going through Hamilton's City Council minutes, which included not only requests from the Ladies Benevolent Society (LBS) on behalf of poor citizens for financial assistance, but also many, many pleas from individuals for either extensions on payment or remittance of their taxes.

While the City Council's willingness to fund the LBS's charity cases led me to the conclusion that local governments appeared to take for granted that they had a responsibility to prevent the poor from starving or freezing to death and to protect their children from total abandonment, I did not consider how, as Heaman explains, the "[p]rinciples of economic justice were addressed as problems of revenue before they were addressed as problems of spending" (5). Heaman shows that the state's taxation regimes were not only sites of knowledge production about poverty and its relationship to society, but they also very literally produced poverty by taxing the poor disproportionately. Like most social welfare historians, I focused on spending — assessing whether or not municipal governments would open the collective purse — but ignored the process whereby the purse came to be at all. It didn't occur to me that regressive taxation created much of the poverty that the City was then pressed to ameliorate on a case-by-case basis. If I had paid attention to how municipal taxation operated — who was taxed, at what rate, who was exempted, and who was hounded out of their homes by local tax collectors — I would have had a much better understanding of the relationship between wealth and poverty in this Victorian city.

My current work on *Grip* magazine also needs to shift to accommodate Heaman's insights. J.W. Bengough, the principal editor and cartoonist at *Grip*, was an acolyte and advocate of Henry George and the so-called "single tax." In *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian Canada*, Ramsay Cook portrayed George as a kook and Bengough as a quixotic and naïve social reformer duped into believing in an easy and quick fix to his society's most intractable problems.²¹ And I believed him. Heaman, however, completely takes apart former historians' dismissal of single taxers as, on the one hand, too socialist and, on the other, too liberal. She shows that single tax theories were the basis for broad-based, cross-class alliances, and a practical politics that coalesced around people's demands for "fairness" in taxation policy. This redirection also poses a significant challenge to the historiography of progressive politics in Canada, which has foregrounded regionalism rather than the transnational politics of municipal taxation.

As I said earlier, it would be difficult for one person to foresee all avenues of inquiry opened up by this book. I would, however, like to pick up a few breadcrumbs left behind for gender historians. Heaman demonstrates how important Macdonald's mastery of clientalist politics was in legitimating the "logic" of protectionist tariffs in an era of global free trade. He had to secure support from both ends of the social and economic spectrum: wealthy corporate interests and the party's grassroots. He usually did so in hotel parlours with the former, and local picnics with the latter. Heaman points to the intimacy of these relationships but doesn't pursue how these patron-client bonds were constituted in particular kinds of masculine sociability. Paying closer attention to how masculine norms and performances influenced, for example, decisions about the tariff structure, its evolution, and its uptake by constituents would foreground patriarchal ideology and social relations in the constitution of both "interest" and "facts."

Heaman addresses gender more directly in the dynamics of consumption. She shows that the men who set the tariff rates had no particular obligation to household consumers since these were, by and large, women. Although disenfranchised and therefore politically weak, women wielded the lion's share of consumer clout. Heaman explains that, naturally, this did not prevent politicians from staging opportunistic and misogynistic appropriations of women's voices, and the substitution of male "knowledge" for female experience. We might ask, then, how largely unsubstantiated assumptions about female consumer behaviours affected political responsiveness to consumer versus manufacturing interests. What did and did not change when (some) women began to vote? Did enfranchisement or women's consumer lobbies affect the pace or character of the bureaucratic state's legitimization project vis-à-vis taxation on consumption?

Undoubtedly, one of this book's most interesting and potentially fruitful lines of analysis pertains to relationships between fiscal policy and identity politics. Heaman shows how politicians and government both harnessed and spurred the public's racial prejudices to reconfigure categories of citizenship that granted protection from taxation to some and resorted to "casual brutality" in extracting taxes from others. *TOGG* makes anti-Chinese sentiment in British Columbia and the repression and genocide of Indigenous peoples in the North-West two cases in point, but also shows more generally how "culture" — that is anything other than mainstream Anglo-Protestant culture — could be represented as an obstacle to market-oriented self-interest, in other

words, an illiberal impediment that justified particular groups' marginalization, exclusion, and/or disenfranchisement.

Heaman reminds us that although only property-owners could vote (so long as their taxes were paid), they were not the only ones paying taxes. Disenfranchised groups paid all sorts of taxes: head taxes, poll taxes, license taxes, school taxes, and, of course, duties on consumables. Taxation without representation meant that protests from these groups, such as Asians, Indigenous peoples, the poor, and women, could simply be ignored. New studies that foregrounded what and how taxes were levied against non-voting citizens specifically would be a fascinating way to think through the illiberality of the liberal state, and how coercive taxation operated with and through other modalities of oppression like racism, impoverishment, settler-colonialism, and patriarchy.

Heaman shows how identity, culture, race, and difference were constituted in political power/knowledge and in economic relationships, as much as in experiences. She therefore seriously challenges any dualistic conceptualization of the political and the social. If, as Heaman points out, social historians' definition of politics is the "mediation of struggles over power and inequality" (10), then taxation, and in particular tax resistance on the part of marginalized groups, is equally relevant for political and social historians. This book demonstrates that experiences of oppression and injustice are intimately connected to the philosophical and intellectual contexts that inform and define political as well as moral economies. In this way, Heaman bridges the impasse adumbrated by Bliss and others, and shows us what's possible when political and social histories converge. *TOGG* signals that the worst of the history wars are over. There remains, nonetheless, a few insurgents both within the academy and without who continue to foment skirmishes on the borders. The final treaty has not been signed and, as we well know, the devil is in the details.

In answer to the question, why Canada? *Tax, Order, and Good Government* replies, why not? Canada, like every other nation, is the consequence of a complex confluence of histories only partially specific to place. The territories that became Canada, as well as Canada the nation, were constantly buffeted by winds that had blown in from elsewhere and circulated in unpredictable ways. For any historian, the challenge has always been to grasp as many of these complex histories as possible. Heaman's accomplishment is to have harnessed so many and balanced the particular and the general so deftly. This book is not

a history of taxation in Canada; it is a history of taxation that is also a history of Canada. Now, we have no excuses for doing tax or Canadian history badly, since this book shows us how to get it right.

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