

# The 'New History' Has Arrived

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as to the fact that too many Canadian historians had joined the wrong "faith". Morton was a strong practising Anglican whose religious views permeated his writings. These national historians defended their ideas with the fervor of a religious zealot. Their convictions about Canada were elevated to religious truths — to be defended at all cost.

This group saw the struggle for the survival of Canada as a mission and themselves as the missionaries who went forth to teach the ignorant, and to carve out a Canadian "civilization" in the wilderness. History for them had a moral purpose, even a "sense of power". They discovered Canada's greatness in her past. In this respect, they were in the national tradition of Carl Berger's late nineteenth-century Canadian imperialists and it is fitting that his second book should deal with these "new Canadian moralists". What is surprising is that he does not deal with the moral nature of their writings, since their greatest contribution was their moral and spiritual revelations about Canadians. Nonetheless, thanks to Berger's study, these historians will receive even more attention. Hopefully, Lower, Creighton and Morton will be the subjects of full-scale biographies and we will see a synthetic treatment of various historiographical themes such as messianism, idealism, nationalism and liberalism, themes which will help us to understand this golden era in Canadian national historiography.

R. DOUGLAS FRANCIS

### The 'New History' Has Arrived

For a decade faculty clubs and graduate lounges have buzzed with talk of the coming renaissance of Canadian historiography, the "new history" which would give the discipline the bite and excitement it has lacked since the golden age of the 1930s. It has been a long decade, as the results of the new history stubbornly refused to materialize. But now, in Michael Katz's book, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West: Family and Class in a Mid-Nineteenth Century City* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1975), the results are here. And they were worth waiting for.

The broad outlines of Katz's interpretation are familiar enough from his articles and from the working papers of the Canadian Social History Project at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, which he headed from 1967 to 1973. Indeed, the first chapter of this book previously appeared in the *Canadian Historical Review* and the fourth in the *Journal of Social History*. Using data from the censuses and from assessment records, he reconstructs the society of Hamilton between 1851 and 1861. He contends that it was shaped largely by two characteristics: transiency and the rigidity of the social structure. Less than a third of those recorded in the 1851 census could still be found in Hamilton ten years later; this was a society in constant movement.

Yet that very population transiency, Katz contends, reinforced the conservatism of the social structure, which became the necessary bond for a people on the move. He casts the interpretation in the form of a general lesson:

Perhaps the history of the relations between transiency and social structure has a moral for the revolutionary. To change social structure he must first slow down migration: human nature yearns for stability; lacking continuity in human relations, people seek it in social forms. If people are to accept a change in social structure, they must at least preserve the familiarity of the faces around them (p. 93).

The close human relationships in stable neighbourhoods that we once imagined to be normal in the nineteenth century did not exist. Instead the structure of inequality itself was the community's bond.

Katz punctures other conventional wisdoms, new and old. As with other quantitative studies of recent years, he shows that the ideal of the extended family in the pre-industrial era is a myth. The simple nuclear family was always the norm. Yet Katz takes sharp issue with the godfather of the quantifiers, Peter Laslett, mounting a strenuous attack on both the methodology and the final results on the family found in Laslett's influential books, *The World We Have Lost* (London, 1965), and *Household and Family in Past Time* (Cambridge, 1971). Katz insists on a dynamic model of the family, measuring its constant change. Laslett is correct, on statistical averages, that the simple family household was the norm. But Katz is able to show, with his dynamic model, that almost all families at some point in their life cycles included servants or boarders or relatives, and were therefore at some point extended. If most people experienced a variety of kinds of households in their lives, what of the question of the impact of household forms on individuals, a question which has much agitated recent students of the family? Katz now contends the question is "virtually meaningless" (p. 228).

There are other surprises on the family. He finds no clear distinction between boarders and relatives in Hamilton households. His argument is convincing that people saw the household, not the family, as the basic unit. Boarders, who were part of most households in some part of the family life cycle, were not necessarily employees living with their employers, but rather young people seeking surrogate families. There was a clear stage of "semi-autonomy" for most young people, a stage when they left the family home — to migrate, to find employment — and became boarders, living in a surrogate family. Their status as boarders gave them more autonomy than they would have enjoyed in the parental home, but still denied them the full independence of heading their own households. As such, it may have been an important educational, socializing stage in the life of most nineteenth-century adolescents. This period of semi-autonomy, Katz also shows, began to narrow over time. The drop in employment opportunities for adolescents and the

rise in the percentage of youths who went to school meant that children stayed at home longer, that the period of time between leaving the parental household and establishing their own independent, married household shortened dramatically. That allows Katz to spring another surprise. The simple family became more, not less important in the city than it had been in the country. As young people stayed longer with their parents, parental influence became more pervasive as a socializing force.

His material on the family illustrates Katz's technique. A close study of hard statistical data is the core of the book, but he always combines it with sophisticated social theory, a blend of soft data, and a fine interpretative sensibility. And the approach is always iconoclastic, as readily tossing down the idols of the new history as the monuments of the old.

It is exciting, persuasively argued stuff, so much so that the reader must be on guard to avoid being carried along with it, carried along to a too-ready acceptance. The reader must remember Katz's own cautions, that this is a preliminary report on a continuing project, and this is the study of just one city over a short period of time. And the reader must add his own cautions. How representative was mid-century Hamilton? It was, after all, a city which was seriously disrupted by a massive depression in the 1850s. It was also a city which was influenced more than most places by the new technology of the decade, the railway. It was also a city which served as a staging area for western migration, a city where people came to make their stake before moving on to farms or small towns in western Upper Canada. Do these factors help account for the transiency Katz has found, do they make Hamilton more like highly mobile American cities than like other Canadian cities? Until we know the answer, we must be cautious about applying Katz's findings to Canada generally. One set of statistics suggests that need for caution. In transient Hamilton, only about thirty percent of householders owned their own homes. But in late nineteenth-century Halifax, the percentage of homeowners was more than twice as great.

There is unease, too, about his use of class. He draws a three-class structure, the entrepreneurial class, the artisan class, and the labouring class. These classes are defined in terms of occupation and economic rank, but Katz also recognizes the need to include class consciousness as a defining element. It is, then, a sensitively drawn picture of class structure, blending statistical categories with subjective criteria. But only the entrepreneurial class is studied in detail. The definitions of the other two classes are so sketchy that we cannot measure the accuracy of Katz's categories. The existence of a dominant, leading class, the group he calls the entrepreneurial class, is well-established; he fleshes it out to a convincing picture of the leaders of society. What is not entirely convincing, however, is his picture of the motivation of this class, the motivation summed up in his designation of it as "entrepre-

neurial". What we know of earlier Canadian elites suggests that entrepreneurial ambitions were not always central, that elite members were not primarily market men. Other ideals, above all the ideals of gentility, drove them. Even the fur trade elite of Montreal, that most crass and commercial of upper classes, was full of men who retired into the gentry as soon as they could, men who defined success by status and manners more than by money and business size. If Katz's elite is indeed entrepreneurial, perhaps he is showing us the beginnings of an important change in Canadian social leadership. But the rather static picture he provides of his elite, with no sense of what went before or what was to come after, gives no sense of such a change. Without such a sense, one is left to wonder about the adequacy of his picture, to wonder whether he has drawn it too much from statistical categories, too little from more slippery but perhaps more finely-tuned non-quantitative sources.

Despite his general lesson to revolutionaries about the relationship of transiency and social change, Katz has disappointingly little to say about social conflict. What he has to say is sensible. He suggests that neither stability nor transiency necessarily produced unrest. It depended upon the social and economic structure in which they operated. Unrest could arise from a stable situation in which too many of the stable population found their opportunity to rise too limited. Or it could arise when rootless, wandering men were thrown together in an exploitive situation. The first set of conditions is of the type that led to the agrarian rebellion in Upper Canada or to artisan radicalism, the second to the militancy of Canadian railway labourers. This is sensible. But it is left undeveloped and the thrust of the argument is towards the first set of conditions, radicalism arising in a stable population. This problem is part of a larger one. It could be argued that a society is best understood by studying its tensions, that the nature and operation of class conflict form the interpretative keys for social history. Quantitative history, however, rests upon a static, cross-sectional picture of society, society as it is captured in the census. Instead of seeing society as the living jungle of conflicting classes, quantitative history sees it as so many dead butterflies, impaled on pins.

But this is ungracious to a book so good. It is merely to suggest what Michael Katz already knows: that quantitative reconstruction is only one part of the historical reality. Generations of historians, employing other intellectual tools, must work with the data and with the insights he has provided. He has given us generous quantities of both. The new history is finally here; we have seen it, and it works. If we do not use it and build on it with our own approaches, if we do not make it more sensitive and flexible, it is our fault, not Katz's. He has done his work surpassingly well.

MICHAEL S. CROSS