

# The Relevance of Canadian History

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culture, challenged so forcefully by F.X. Garneau, has been laid to rest forever by a post-war generation of professional historians. Contrary to Garneau they have done so without relying on the crutch of nationalism!

MICHAEL D. BEHIELS

### The Relevance of Canadian History

W.L. Morton once described himself as a "relational historian". The appropriateness of that description is revealed in *Contexts of Canada's Past: Selected Essays of W.L. Morton* (Toronto, Macmillan of Canada, 1980), a collection of Morton's essays published in the Carleton Library series and edited by A.B. McKillop. The description is, of course, far too modest, as Carl Berger has shown in his brilliant chapter on Morton in *The Writing of Canadian History* and as Brian McKillop reminds us in his perceptive introduction to this volume. By any standard of judgement, W.L. Morton must be ranked among the tiny number of historians of Canada who have deeply influenced the way we think and write about our past. Throughout his long career his unique contribution to historical writing was to discover, to understand and to explain the sometimes ironic, sometimes paradoxical, frequently baffling and often subtle relationships between local, regional and national loyalties; native, French, English and immigrant traditions; daily endeavours and high policy; cultural heritage and environmental influence that are the essence of our history. As McKillop remarks, no other historian "has been as sensitive to the parts within the Canadian whole, the sources of division and hostility, and the multitudinous particularities of Canadian life, while at the same time searching for the factors which make that whole greater than the sum of its constituent elements, thereby giving Canadian life its significance" (p. 10).

Morton's task was to identify and unravel the complex web of the past, whether it was "a nationalism cut athwart by a sense of sectional injustice" (p. 108), or the preservation of "the essentials of the greatest of civilizations in the grimmest of environments" (p. 184), or "the unique nature of the Canadian community, a political community without nationalism or ideology, a community of political allegiance alone" (p. 254), or the reconciliation of "the legal authority of the Crown with the democratic power of the people" (p. 209). In "Seeing an Unliterary Landscape", an essay rich in the elegant phrases and sweeping associations of a master historian, Morton explained that he sought "two things": "One was to see my world only in some more penetrating way than casual sight afforded; the other was that others should also see more in it than met the unaided eye" (p. 22). Acutely aware that his were the aspirations of

the poet and novelist, he firmly believed that they were also the challenge of the historian.

I set myself, therefore, to see by reconstruction my actual landscape of the prairie west as it had been seen, in order to arrive at a cumulative sight and insight. This is simply what any student of history does. He tries by reading, seeing, travelling, talking, to reexperience what past men have done, and thought and felt, so that he can see as they saw, think as they thought, feel as they felt. It is of course laborious, but, more important, it is in its own way imaginative and creative. Like plastic art, or imaginative literature, it makes out of things as they were something more that authenticates by enhancing (p. 22).

The work began with a proclamation for an interpretation of Canadian history ("Clio In Canada") which would explain the unique character of the Canadian west and with a magnificent history of the town and district of Gladstone. Essays on agriculture in the Red River colony and the significance of site in the settlement process followed. These last are masterpieces of detailed historical investigation and reasoning. Gradually Morton's research interests shifted from western to national questions — McKillop marks the break with the essay "The Bias of Prairie Politics" (1955) and the publication of *Manitoba: A History* (1957). In 1960 Morton entitled his presidential address to the Canadian Historical Association "The Relevance of Canadian History". Perhaps the most famous of all his essays, it was at once a thoughtful summation of his work and a forecast of the interpretative threads he would weave into his future writing. "The Relevance of Canadian History" bristled with confidence about the elements which defined Canada's past and gave it universal significance. "Canadian history", he proclaimed, "is not a parody of American, as Canada is not a second-rate United States, still less a United States that failed" (p. 166). Canadian history was shaped by the country's northern character, by dependence, by a monarchical form of government and by being destined to have "special relations with other states". Canadian history was, in fact, "an important chapter in a distinct and even unique human endeavour, the civilization of the northern and arctic lands" (p. 166). That was the insight which "authenticated by enhancing" his earlier work and which would give focus to his books and essays that were yet to come.

History, Morton observed in "Clio In Canada", "works creatively in the social order whether by reinforcing tradition or by opening new paths of thought" (p. 104). No one who reads *Contexts of Canada's Past* can escape the conclusion that W.L. Morton's history, in its rich detail and variety, in its very special insights into our past, has done both.

In Morton's presidential address "relevance" was given several meanings.

One, he wrote, was “the relations between the history of Canada and the histories of other communities” (p. 163). This apparently, is the context of “relevance” Robin Winks had in mind when he chose *The Relevance of Canadian History: U.S. and Imperial Perspectives* (Toronto, Macmillan of Canada, 1979) as the title of his Joanne Goodman Lectures delivered at the University of Western Ontario in 1977. The common theme to these lectures is more didactic than substantive. By comparing the interpretation, trends and phenomena of Canadian history with those of the history of the United States and of Commonwealth nations, Winks argues, the importance — “relevance” — of Canadian history can be demonstrated “to Americans, Nigerians, and scholars of modern Britain” (p. xii). Comparative history, he asserts, helps “us to escape from the assumption that a particular course of events [in our own history] is natural, almost foreordained” (p. 2). More important still, it “helps one overcome the natural, conservative bias that history is simply one damn thing after another and helps one begin to associate some sophisticated causal patterns with the continuum from past to present” (p. 3).

Winks is very conscious of the charge that comparative history “inevitably” will be “superficial” (p. 1). National history, studied in isolation, he counters, is no less “superficial, and in more subtle and socially dangerous ways” (p. 1). The three lectures in this volume are not superficial. They do, however, elaborate upon and draw conclusions from very familiar and very general illustrative points. The inadequacy of variations of the frontier thesis as an explanation of Canadian historical development, the contrasting treatment of native peoples by society and in law in New Zealand, Australia and Canada, the influence of the Durham Report and responsible government in Canada upon the evolution of new Commonwealth states, and Canadian perceptions of American imperialism are all-too-common reference points in Canadian history and in Winks’ Lectures. That may disappoint some serious students of the subject. Each topic, however, lends itself to comparative analysis and together they lead neatly to his concluding argument for the use of Canadian history in comparative studies:

To use comparative insights surely enriches the perspective on a single historiography. To know that areas which come late to industrialization, tend to concentrate in cities and along transport lines, whether in the American West, in developing countries, or in Canada as a whole, is to see a unity in which the genuinely unique stands out more immediately. To see how Canada cannot be separated from the history of the British Empire, or from constituent parts of that imperial history, is not to diminish the Canadian sense of independence nor to aggrandize the Canadian contribution to the independence of others. To see that whatever form American imperialism may have taken in Canada has been altered substantially by myth, misunderstanding, and ideology is not to

diminish the reality. All such balances, such suggestions of cause and effect relationships, such comparisons surely serve to show that Canadian history is exciting, widely relevant outside Canada's borders, and important to its citizens (p. 84).

Comparative analysis, or at least the attempt to use a comparative analysis, was also the organizing principle for *Perspectives on Revolution and Evolution* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1979), edited by Richard Preston for the Duke University Center for Commonwealth and Comparative Studies. In this case the Canadian experience is used as a model to "throw light on the nature and significance of the revolutionary factor in American life and society and on American cultural development and vice versa" (p. v). The papers in this volume, originally presented to a Bicentennial Conference organized by the Canadian Studies Center at Duke University, cover a wide variety of subjects. Robin Winks, in an opening address, "Cliché and the Canadian-American Relationship", briefly rehearses the case for comparative studies he would soon make in his Goodman Lectures and asks "whether this most logical of all comparisons can lead to new approaches in comparative methodology" (p. 15). Seymour Martin Lipsett reflects upon the themes of revolution and counter revolution in a summary of the papers presented at the conference. James W. Ely surveys continuity and change in the post-revolutionary legal system of the United States. Henry S. Albinski in "Organized Politics and Political Temper" and Robert Presthus in "Evolution and Canadian Political Culture: The Politics of Accommodation" attempt comparisons of the Canadian and American political systems. John Porter, in "Melting Pot and Mosaic", concluded that Canadians and Americans were remarkably alike in their attitudes towards immigration and desirable types of immigrants. Two aspects of cultural history are discussed in Claude Bissell, "The Place of Learning and the Arts in Canadian Life" and A.J.M. Smith, "Evolution and Revolution as Aspects of English-Canadian and American Literature". Guy Rocher presents an interesting analysis of revolutionary thought in Quebec in "The Quiet Revolution and Revolutionary Movements among Quebec French Canadians".

The Conference which produced these papers was preceded, as Professor Preston explains, by a "preplanning conference" (p. v). There participants anticipated that differences between Canada and the United States could not be explained simply by the presence or absence of a revolutionary heritage. Indeed, in the most interesting paper in the volume, André Raynauld challenges the assumption that evolutionary and revolutionary traditions tell us very much about the development of these societies when compared, for example, with "the fundamental factors of geography and climate" (p. 135). Moreover, in the larger context of the history of western society, Raynauld suggests that the revolution against medievalism and traditionalism, the revolution of modern technology and the scientific revolution have all had a deeper and more lasting influence on

Canada and the United States than the revolution against colonialism which was being celebrated at this conference.

A second difficulty anticipated at the pre-planning conference was that "few scholars have studied the same elements in both Canadian and American development" (p. 10). In this regard, it must be noted that Professor Ely does not make mention of legal development in Canada, Professor Bissell discusses only Canadian aspects of learning and the arts and Professor Rocher's paper can be linked to the heritage of the American Revolution (a task he does not pretend to do) only by the most generous stretching of one's imagination. Some of the papers which do attempt a comparative analysis reveal another aspect of the problem. As Professor Presthus remarks, "a review of Canadian history leaves the foreign observer with conflicting impressions, perhaps especially when he brings to it the assumptions of American ideals and experience" (p. 107). To this reviewer, at least, both Professor Presthus and Professor Albinski use such assumptions in their evaluations of the history of Canadian political life and thereby weaken their essays as examples of comparative analysis.

What has all this to do with the "relevance" of Canadian history? That depends. If the relevance of Canadian history is to be found in its relation to the "histories of other communities", the Goodman Lectures illustrate a mechanistic but suggestive method of testing relevance. *Perspectives on Revolution and Evolution* carries that process a step further by highlighting more specific areas for examination than those in Professor Winks' lectures. The papers in that volume also signal some of the problems of applying the comparative method and reveal the weaknesses as well as the strengths of this approach to historical study. But if "relevance" is more than a problem in method, if it is to see the history of Canada in a "more penetrating way than casual sight" affords, then one must read and wonder at the luxuriant detail, astonishing scope and shrewd insight in the essays of a master craftsman like W.L. Morton.

ROBERT CRAIG BROWN

### The Wheat Trade and Economic Development in Upper and Lower Canada

In recent years the study of the wheat staple as a prime determinant for Canada's economic development has moved beyond the Prairies in the National Policy years to early nineteenth-century Lower and Upper Canada. While the books reviewed here introduce certain refinements to the staple thesis, they all agree that the dominance of wheat was not only inevitable but crucial to economic growth and diversification, and they all reflect a strong sense of geographic-economic determinism. *The Upper Canada Trade: A study of the*