

A Biography of Robert Baldwin: The Morning Star of Memory by Michael S. Cross

Chris Raible

Volume 105, Number 1, Spring 2013

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1050754ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050754ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Raible, C. (2013). Review of [*A Biography of Robert Baldwin: The Morning Star of Memory* by Michael S. Cross]. *Ontario History*, 105(1), 136–137.

<https://doi.org/10.7202/1050754ar>

A Biography of Robert Baldwin: The Morning Star of Memory

By Michael S. Cross

Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2012. 430 pages. \$39.95 hardback. ISBN 978-0-195449-54-9. <<http://www.oupcanada.com>>

Here at last: a comprehensive, sympathetic, appreciative but not uncritical biography, the fruit of a life-long study by retired Dalhousie professor Michael Cross. Alas, Robert Baldwin is hardly a Canadian household name, notwithstanding recent efforts by John Ralston Saul to recognize him, along with Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine, as first among the founders of our country. However, in contrast to Saul's lauding them as "the architects of democracy and non-violent politics," Cross admits that his portrayal of Baldwin has "a somewhat different emphasis." (368)

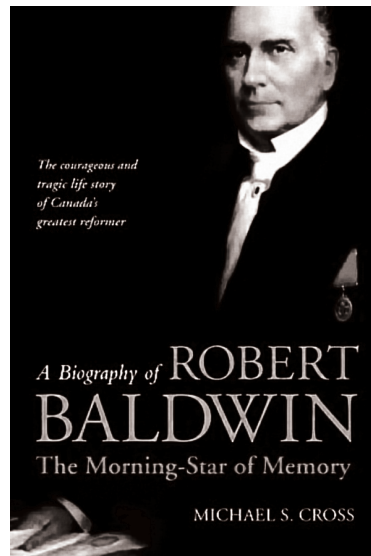
His father, Dr. William Warren Baldwin, rose by merit and marriage to become an early member of York's establishment, a status that Robert inherited. Though qualified by faith, property and patriotism, the Baldwins were too liberal in attitude for inclusion in the elite group popularized by William Lyon Mackenzie as the "Family Compact." Loyalty to his own Baldwin family, along with a faith in British law, were the defining characteristics of Robert's life.

He was, according to his father, destined to political leadership, "the only man under Gods [sic] providence that was fitted for these struggles." (64) The son duti-

fully obeyed, though much of the time his heart was not in it. He was, as Cross notes, the "most reluctant of politicians, the most private of men." (40)

As a politician, Baldwin was something of a visionary. He understood that Canadian order and good government required English-French cooperation—hence his early alliance with LaFontaine. He promoted municipal government; he supported public education; he successfully secularized the provincial university. Yet he was hardly a democrat—he opposed electoral reform. Instead, he trusted the social stability of landed property owners, believing that "the wealth and prestige they enjoyed also imposed social responsibility for the general good." (73) In Parliament, he resisted efforts by his fellow reformers to promote economic development through government expenditures; he was more interested in constitutional principles than roads and bridges.

Baldwin's life, in part, is the story of the eventual achievement of "responsible government"—long heralded as the distinguishing feature of the Canadian constitution in contrast to the irresponsible excesses of American republicanism. The concept was first articulated (apparently)



in the 1820s by father W.W. Baldwin, and explicitly proposed by Lord Durham in his 1839 Report. Cross describes, in fascinating and often dramatic detail, Robert Baldwin's successful efforts in the 1840s to make the ideal a reality.

Surprisingly, to this reviewer at least, Cross makes but slight acknowledgement that the 1841 Union was accompanied by alterations to the pattern and practice of provincial government. The former Executive Council became a "Ministry," its members no longer advisors but ministers, heads of government departments. Moreover, these ministers were not simply trusted citizens, they had to be elected members of the Assembly. Though not by statute, as put into practice by Lord Sydenham and his successors, British forms were thus exported to Canada. This transformation was surely an essential first step toward of any notion of responsible government—yet Baldwin had nothing to do with it.

Responsible government was not simply a lofty ideal, it was an earthy insistence that political power—particularly total control of patronage appointments—be held by the elected majority political party, not by British colonial officials. Baldwin at times felt forced to act as a ruthless party leader, though he usually left to his colleague Francis Hincks the darker, messier duties of winning elections.

Laudably comprehensive as this work is, it gives rather short shrift to some aspects of Baldwin's life. It does not, for example, explore Mackenzie's long dislike of Baldwin, originating in their contested election of 1828. Cross describes the 1849 Montreal burning of Parliament quite wonderfully, but he barely touches the 1837 Rebellion. (He does note—three different times, no less—Baldwin's naiveté in trusting John Rolph and Lieutenant Governor Bond Head when recruited to carry

a truce message to Mackenzie.) Also, Baldwin was an able lawyer, yet the dramas of his defence of York editor Francis Collins, charged with seditious libel in 1829, or of John Montgomery, charged with treason in 1838, are barely mentioned. However, such slights seem trivial when compared to Cross's otherwise full presentation of Baldwin's personal and political life as a whole.

Another omission—a quibble perhaps—is the book's lack of a bibliography. The notes offer full citations as well as worthy comment, but a complete listing of all primary and secondary sources would have been useful.

Perhaps the most striking feature of this biography is its emphasis on the central importance in Robert's life of his marriage; a decade of bliss followed by two decades of grief after Eliza's 1836 death in childbirth. Every chapter begins with a brief epigraph noting Eliza's continued influence. Robert's unremitting sense of her presence in his consciousness, his devotion to her memory, almost borders on the pathological. Robert kept a personal diary and carefully preserved of all their intimate correspondence and personal treasures. The fact that so many Baldwin private papers are today accessible enabled Cross to present far more of his subject's internal life than is found in most biographies.

All in all, in this splendid portrayal Robert Baldwin comes across as not particularly likeable, but nonetheless totally admirable. In recent years we have been blessed with fresh, full-scale biographies of two of his contemporaries, Thomas D'Arcy McGee and John A. Macdonald. Dare we hope for comparable treatments of others—of Francis Hincks, John Strachan or William Lyon Mackenzie?

Chris Raible
Creemore, Ontario