

Donald Creighton: A Life in History by Donald Wright

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Volume 108, Number 1, Spring 2016

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1050615ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050615ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Axelrod, P. (2016). Review of [*Donald Creighton: A Life in History* by Donald Wright]. *Ontario History*, 108(1), 126–128. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050615ar>

Book Reviews

Spring 2016

Donald Creighton

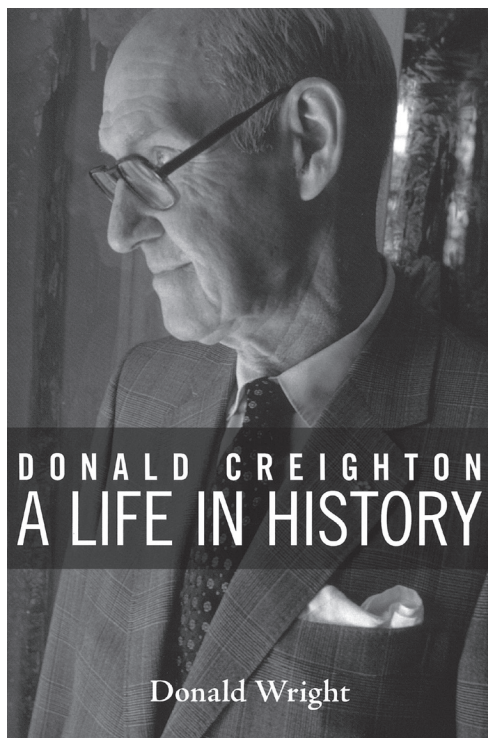
A Life in History

by Donald Wright

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015, 472 pages. \$28.46 Paperback. ISBN 978-1-4426-2682-9. \$67.50 Cloth ISBN 9781442649477. \$27.95 ebook (EPUB format) ISBN 9781442620308 (www.utppublishing.com)

As Canada's most prominent early post-war historian, Donald Creighton was a force of nature, both shedding light and casting shadows in his interpretation of the nation's evolution. *The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence* (1937), *The Road to Confederation* (1944), and his two-volume biography of John A. Macdonald, completed in 1955, garnered professional and, in the case of the latter, considerable popular acclaim. His forceful, evocative prose gave life to the land and its leaders. In his rendering, ambitious British merchants strove to forge an east-west economic unit, and the visionary John A. completed the political enterprise that made that dream attainable. In all of his writings, Creighton eviscerated critics of these nation-building ventures, which also made for great reading. And yet, notwithstanding his professional success, Creighton lived much of his life as a bitter and unfulfilled man, and died believing that the Canadian experiment had failed disastrously. Creighton's own story cries out for an explanation, and Donald Wright brilliantly provides it.

Born in Toronto in 1902, Creighton



was the product of old Ontario. His father edited the Methodist publication, *The Christian Guardian*, for some three decades, and his mother inspired in him a love of English literature; a superb student, by the end of high school, he was writing fluently and creatively, skills he honed in university. After graduating from Victoria College, he headed to Oxford for an M.A., married Luella Bruce, began (but did not complete) a doctorate at the Sorbonne, and returned to the University of Toronto to teach history on a permanent basis in 1932. He retired in 1971 and, following a painful decline in health, died in 1979.

Inspired by his mentor, colleague, and

friend, Harold Innis, whose book, *The Fur Trade in Canada*, offered a compelling economic justification for the British, northern, and non-American, character of Canada, Creighton built all of his subsequent work, meticulously tracked by Wright, on this conceptual foundation. At the same time, the biographer lays bare the limitations of Creighton's thesis. He never revised his views that Aborigines were too primitive to contribute usefully to the Canadian project; that French Canadian nationalism was a relentless force of cultural and political destruction; that Liberal politicians and a bevy of self-serving provincial premiers were opportunistic and blind; and that, by the 1960s, America all but owned Canada Inc. This was the source of Creighton's unrelieved despair. The country was a failure driven to ground, finally, by Pearson, Trudeau, Levesque, and their deluded minions.

As Maurice Careless, Creighton's successor to the chair of the U of T History department, perceptively noted, Creighton's historical and political writings were themselves not quite free of delusion. Whig historians, whom Creighton deplored, believed in the myth of continuous progress, but in finding tragedy at the end of every great Canadian venture, Creighton was a Whig in reverse: he used the past to explain the calamities of the present. He was, alas, a moralist, even more than an evidence-gathering historian who, in Carl Berger's words, "valued imagination and tuition: Truth he believed came through feelings and flashes of insight, not through experiments and measurement" (11). Wright respectfully, but critically, and persuasively, provides the deepest account yet of Creighton's place in Canadian historiography.

Equally interesting and insightful is the author's extensive consideration of Creighton the husband, father, and colleague. While women played virtually no role in

his (or anyone else's) historical writing, except as occasional adornments, he married a strong, creative individual to whom he was deeply devoted. Academically gifted, Luella Creighton (who also graduated from Victoria College) shared Creighton's traditional values and chose to organize her life around his needs and ambitions rather than pursue her own education. But within the marriage, she was fiercely independent (sleeping, to Creighton's dismay, in her own bedroom), and determined to establish herself as a writer, which she did. She wrote seven works of fiction and non-fiction, primarily for young readers, though she lamented the books' modest public reception. To his credit, and as much as the sources allow, Wright tells her story alongside Creighton's, and lists her publications in one of the book's appendices.

Creighton's daughter Cynthia was a source of both pride and puzzlement. A distant though caring father and grandfather, he was flabbergasted by Cynthia's rebellious behavior in the 1960s. To his parents' dismay, she married an American Catholic, moved to the west coast, and became a feminist activist and Trotskyite socialist. He understood her no better than he did the generational movement she joined, though ironically, Creighton, the resolute anti-American (like his fellow conservative George Grant) was admired by nationalist New Leftists for his "anti-imperialist" writings.

He was loved less by his U of T colleagues, especially during his tenure as department chair. He was stubborn, short of temper, and thin skinned, and in time, he had offended almost everyone in the department. Admirably, in 1940, Creighton stood by Frank Underhill when he was attacked by the Ontario premier and U of T's board of governors for his controversial views on Canadian foreign policy, but their

relationship deteriorated in the years that followed. He believed that the “pot-bellied little bastard” (210) was a mere journalist who had never produced a substantive historical work; it was especially galling to Creighton that Underhill, between the two, was the more popular professor.

Creighton, however, did elicit the respect and loyalty of his doctoral students, because he encouraged them to follow their intellectual interests even if they differed from his own, and he worked tirelessly on their behalf. Notably, he supported Ken McLaughlin’s innovative use of quantitative, computer-generated data to write his thesis on the 1896 federal election. Lamentably, Creighton was as anti-Semitic as his colleagues and friends—an attitude that pervaded the University of Toronto—but

never toward his one Jewish doctoral student, Angus Gilbert.

Wright clearly struggled with his complex, fascinating subject. His ambivalence shows in his assessment of Creighton’s 1970 lament for the nation, *Canada’s First Century*, a “great book,” but really, as Wright demonstrates, little more than a raging polemic. In sum, Wright’s volume is a nuanced story of the historian and his humanity. Creighton, undoubtedly, would hate the book because it has the temerity to question some of his judgments. He is quiet now, but thanks to his impressive oeuvre and now, to Wright’s outstanding biography, his legacy will endure.

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A Great Rural Sisterhood *Madge Robertson Watt & the ACWW*

by Linda M. Ambrose

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. 326 pages. \$32.95 Paperback. ISBN 9781442615793. \$75.00 Cloth ISBN 9781442647725. \$32.95 ebook (EPUB format) ISBN 9781442669024. (www.utppublishing.com)

In this carefully-researched and engaging biography, Linda M. Ambrose explores the life of Madge Robertson Watt, a woman who devoted much of her adult life to raising awareness of rural women’s issues, first at home in Canada, and then on a continental and global scale. Madge Watt is best known for her role in establishing the first Women’s Institute (WI) in Britain in 1915, and was central to the creation of the Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW) in 1933. In spite of the many achievements Watt accomplished, particularly her efforts to nurture a transnational network of clubwomen, she has largely been ignored by Canadian historians. With

the exception of those well-versed in the histories of the WI or the ACWW, Watt is an obscure historical figure. Ambrose’s book goes a long way to help fill a large gap in the historiography of rural women’s club work, offering a detailed and colourful account of the enigmatic Watt.

One of the (many) strengths of Ambrose’s book is her gift for story-telling, especially the pace at which Watt’s life unfolds. As Ambrose describes, Watt was a woman with “multiple selves” (217), a woman who was provided with particular advantages in her youth that shaped her into an indomitable force within clubwomen’s circles. Structured chronologically, the book’s six chap-