

Carl Berger, *Honour and the Search for Influence. A History of the Royal Society of Canada*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1996, 167 p.

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Volume 20, Number 49, 1996

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/800399ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/800399ar>

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Publisher(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

0829-2507 (print)

1918-7750 (digital)

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Cite this review

White, R. (1996). Review of [Carl Berger, *Honour and the Search for Influence. A History of the Royal Society of Canada*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1996, 167 p.] *Scientia Canadensis*, 20, 122–124. <https://doi.org/10.7202/800399ar>

Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Carl Berger

Honour and the Search for Influence. A History of the Royal Society of Canada, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1996, 167 pages.

Carl Berger's considerable stature as a Canadian historian is based largely on his two main works – *The Sense of Power*, his 1970 study of late-19th-century English Canadian imperialism, and his 1986 book on English Canadian historiography *The Writing of Canadian History*. Both are thorough to the point of being definitive, and remain the standard works on their subjects. For readers of this journal he may be better known for his venture into the history of science, *Science, God, and Nature in Victorian Canada*, a brief yet insightful work that, while receiving less attention than his two earlier more substantial titles, was nonetheless important. These books, together with a few seminal articles, have given Berger a reputation as a rigorous – one might almost say intimidating – intellectual historian of Victorian Canada.

Through his many years as a Professor of History at University of Toronto, however, Berger has remained an active teacher of Canadian history for undergraduates. And in doing so he has developed a remarkable understanding of the general history of the country. So while some might be surprised, and even a little disappointed, at Berger's latest effort, *Honour and the Search for Influence: A History of the Royal Society of Canada*, those who see Berger as the Canadian generalist he is will likely be neither.

The scope of the work is modest, no question, and the methodology basic. Using the many transactions and publications of the society from its conception in 1882 right through to the present, Berger has simply undertaken to write a history of the institution. But being the historian he is, Berger sees much more than the development of the Royal Society in these documents. What catches his eye is what one might call the intellectual context of the Society. He sees the Society's members responding to the waves of change that befell the intellectual world through the 20th century, as amateurs gave way to academics and humanists to scientists.

He observes and relates the Society's response to, for example, the rise of laboratory science early in the century, the growth of social science in the interwar years, and the great expansion of universities in the post-World War Two years. Canadian phenomena, such as the retreat of French Canadian social science in the 1920s after the promising early work of Léon Gerin before the Great War, are also explored. So in the end this book becomes something of a 'short intellectual history of Canada' in the 20th century. For as Berger states in the preface, the Royal Society 'has mirrored in microcosm the salient themes in the country's intellectual development.' In this alone, the book is valuable.

Yet there is an important interpretive theme here as well: that the Royal Society has, since its inception, flirted with irrelevance. For one thing, as Berger explains, it was formed as, and remained, a conservative institution, always far from the scholarly vanguard and suspicious of change. This certainly restricted its relevance. Such novelties mentioned above as laboratory and social science, not to mention the increasing role of women in scholarly life, were more often than not resisted by the Society. Berger also repeatedly points to the fact that the 'Royal Society has always been considerably less than the sum of its parts.'(137) That is to say, although many of its members made exceptional achievements the Society itself usually contributed little to these achievements; other more specific institutions born in the 20th century, like the National Research Council or the Canadian Historical Association, have played a much more vital role in the development and dissemination of Canadian scholarship. And in spite of its pretensions to bilingualism, and to being a national Canadian academy, there was very little exchange between the French and English language sections. Most telling of all might be that throughout its history the Society's own members have been notably apathetic.

One weakness of the book might be that this important theme has such a low profile. This is partly stylistic. Berger is a laconic writer, with a tendency to understatement. Such a style has its rewards for the reader; referring to the Society in the Preface of the book, Berger writes 'That it survived its first half century is a puzzle that alerts us to the unappreciated role of inertia and vanity in the persistence of institutions.' (x) But it also makes its demands upon the reader. The rather opaque title does not help either. Eventually one learns (135-37) that 'honour' and 'the search for influence' have been the two principal driving forces behind the Society, but reducing it down to this does the book a disservice. What Berger

really seems to be saying is that the Society, having failed in its search for influence, has done little more than bestow honour of questionable significance.

This is not meant as a fundamental criticism. The theme of irrelevance is most certainly in the text, and the book has plenty of other insights. It is also a model of organization and succinctness. Berger proceeds through the Society's history in chapters structured very cleverly on both chronological and thematic criteria, making the narrative clear and understandable.

What one will not find much about is what actually went on in the Society. Those looking for a conventional institutional history, a litany of events organized by Presidents' regimes, will be unsatisfied, as will those looking for material on the scholarly or creative accomplishments of its individual members. But those who are prepared to accept this book for what it is — a perceptive analysis of a public institution and its relations with the social medium in which it lived — will likely be enlightened and entertained.

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