

Presidential Address: The View of History in the Making of Canada's External Policies

David M.L. Farr

Volume 13, Number 1, 1978

London 1978

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/030473ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/030473ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0068-8878 (print)

1712-9109 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Farr, D. M. (1978). Presidential Address: The View of History in the Making of Canada's External Policies. *Historical Papers / Communications historiques*, 13(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.7202/030473ar>

Article abstract

On se propose ici de discuter de la place qu'a tenue l'histoire dans l'élaboration de la politique extérieure du pays en se référant principalement aux années d'après la deuxième guerre mondiale.

L'auteur s'arrête d'abord aux "leçons" qui se dégagent de cette histoire, tant celles qui sont issues de la mémoire collective que celles qui résultent d'un événement particulier. Dans le premier groupe figurent l'importance de l'unité nationale, le besoin de faire contrepoids aux Etats-Unis et la conscience grandissante du rôle d'intermédiaire que le pays est appelé à jouer de par la place singulière qu'il a toujours occupée entre la Grande-Bretagne et les Etats-Unis. Au chapitre des événements, l'auteur s'attarde à la dépression des années trente, à l'échec de la Ligue des Nations, aux accords de Munich et aux relations quasi fraternelles que le Canada entretient avec son voisin du sud depuis le début du siècle.

Au fil des ans et des événements, un certain style de diplomatie s'est façonné. Ce style, il est empirique et discret, axé sur l'immédiat, préoccupé du juste milieu et reconnu pour sa grande capacité d'adaptation. Maints exemples sont apportés à l'appui de l'une ou l'autre caractéristique et l'auteur conclut en souhaitant que les documents, en particulier ceux qui se rapportent aux affaires extérieures du pays, deviennent de plus en plus accessibles aux chercheurs. Notre connaissance du passé en dépend.

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

*The View of History
in the Making of Canada's External Policies*

DAVID M.L. FARR

The Canadian Historical Association and I maintain a vital bond: we both came into the world in the same year. (I hasten to add that the Association's founding preceded mine by a few months.) It has, however, been sobering for me to recall that the CHA is the oldest of the national associations in Canada representing particular academic disciplines. More comforting has been the chance to observe, from my vantage point as an historian in Ottawa, the growth and strengthening of the Association. I see in this experience some of the trials, disappointments and modest achievements that all who have reached middle age must acknowledge.

The Canadian Historical Association has been a force for good in assisting the historical calling in this country since 1922. I am confident that it will continue to be so. Most of the success it has attained has derived from the voluntary labours, over many years, of a large number of devoted men and women and I am proud to pay tribute to them. I thank you for the honour you have done me in electing me to this office. In speaking to you I regret one thing: that I am unable to do justice to the bilingual character of the CHA. However, as happens so frequently in our contemporary world, my deficiencies will be made good by an electronic substitute.

From all sides today universities are told they should be preparing their students for jobs, that their courses should be "vocationally oriented", that the interests of their faculty should be "relevant". In the eyes of students there are "hard" subjects, such as commerce or engineering, which lead directly to jobs, and "soft" subjects, such as English and history, which do not. Historians, then, are pressed to defend the value of their discipline in practical terms. Normally they do this by emphasizing its capacity to develop the critical faculties, the familiar "training-of-the-mind" argument. It is unnecessary, even presumptuous, for me to expatiate on this feature of history before this audience. There is, after all, such a thing as "preaching to the converted".

Instead, I shall speak about a more tangible aspect of history, one relating both to the subject and to its practitioners. If there be vocational implications in my remarks, so much the better. My principal objective is to discuss the place of history in the framing of public policy, specifically Canada's policies in external affairs. It is self-evident that the actions of governments, corporations and other bodies are not made with reference only to the present. Decision-makers bring into their analyses of situations experience which they feel is relevant. Although contemporary policy advisers proclaim the efficacy of theories and models, they

still rely heavily on perceptions of the past in developing rationales for decisions. Since the period during which Canada has been competent to make most of her foreign policy decisions is relatively short and since the corps of decision-makers is a small one, I propose to lump ministers and their advisers together. I will not restrict my remarks to a particular span in Canadian affairs, although most of what I say will apply to the years after 1945. A fascination of this topic is that it is cumulative. The behaviour of ministers and their advisers, while influenced by what has gone before, is in itself a part of history. It is not so much a case of one generation influencing another as there existing an unbroken historical consciousness which is continuously enlarged through infusions of new experience.

I shall begin with what everyone, mostly unawares, brings to the making of decisions: a frame of reference. This enables the individual to cope with the complexities and uncertainties of his environment, to order his thoughts for the purpose of arriving at a decision. It is what the Germans call a "Weltanschauung", what the political scientists build up from a "belief system", and what Walter Lippmann, in his brilliant essay of 1922, *Public Opinion*, called a "moral code". To Lippmann there were three elements in a moral code: "a picture of human nature, a map of the universe, and a version of history".¹

Let us apply these elements to the Canadians responsible for making decisions in the field of foreign affairs. I decline to enter into a discussion of how these individuals viewed "human nature", preferring to leave that mysterious concept to the theologians, the psychologists, and now the political scientists. The Canadian policy-makers' "map of the universe", until quite recently, was simple enough. It resembled the Greek and Roman map of the world. I am sure you have all seen it: a circle, the upper half representing Asia, bisected by the belt of the Mediterranean, the lower half composed of Europe and Africa. The whole was surrounded by the unknown oceans. For most of Canada's history her universe was the North Atlantic world. The Dominion or perhaps even a region of it, would occupy the top half of the circle, with Great Britain and the United States comprising the lower. All around lay comfortable darkness, fitfully broken by glimpses of Paris or Rome, South Africa, Siberia, Chanak and other places of remote and momentary interest to Canadians.

Thus we are left with our subjects' "version of history". This was, I suggest, a vital element in their frame of reference. I say this not because it contributes to historians' sense of self-esteem (I am sure we all have visions of being Adam Smiths teaching Younger Pitts), but because it seems to me to be basically true. There is no doubt that the individuals who have managed Canada's external relations since the beginning of the century have had a broad, and occasionally deep, acquaintance with their country's past. Mackenzie King, before he began to make history, had learned a peculiar version of it at his mother's knee. Later he studied economic history (probably not Canadian) at Toronto and Harvard. Lester Pearson read history in two universities and taught it, along with his coaching duties, for several years. Among the government's professional advisers

1. *Public Opinion* (New York, 1922; repr. 1965), p. 80.

HISTORY AND CANADA'S EXTERNAL POLICIES

on foreign policy since the First Great War, a remarkably large number had undertaken formal studies in history. Some, such as Hume Wrong and Hugh Keenleyside, had gained reputations in the discipline. The most influential of them all, O.D. Skelton, had not only taught history through the medium of political economy, but had written extensively in the field.² It is not surprising, then, that we should find a knowledge of Canada's previous experience in international affairs entering into the intellectual approach of the men in the East Block between the wars and after 1945.

I would not like to suggest that the fact that these officials knew some Canadian history improved the quality of their decisions. By itself, a knowledge of history cannot improve analysis. One may draw false comparisons from the past, as Anthony Eden did at Suez; one may inaccurately diagnose a past event; one may steal from history to provide dubious support for a pre-determined course of action. Usually historical analogies are more appropriate for long-term judgments, but occasionally they are used, with unfortunate consequences, for short-term predictions. The model of Japanese and German aggression in the thirties that some policy-makers in the United States applied to North Vietnam in the 1960's is a case in point. There are limitations to the historical model in choosing alternative courses of action. More often than not it is better used in the negative sense, as a warning of what should be avoided. It is also true that events experienced at first hand may impress themselves more sharply on a young person's historical consciousness than life's later encounters. How many Canadians, for instance, felt a first stirring of national identity through service in the great wars of this century? How many young Canadians, later to be diplomats, studying in Europe between the wars, were touched for the rest of their days by directly witnessing totalitarianism and the descent into international anarchy? The letters of the brilliant Frank Pickersgill, recently re-published, bring out the shock, to a young man from Winnipeg, of the recognition of evil in the Europe of the late thirties.³ For these observers, the traumatic events of the 1930's lived on in "the reality world of the mind".⁴

Having established the Canadian policy-makers' acquaintance with history, it is time to define what I mean by "a version of history". The most convenient way of looking at it is to consider it as a form of "myth". I do not use the term pejoratively, suggesting that educated Canadians held views of the past that were

2. It is sometimes overlooked that, before entering government service in 1924, Skelton had written five books, some professedly biographical, which are really general histories of Canada; *The Day of Sir Wilfrid Laurier* (1916); *The Railway Builders* (1916); *The Canadian Dominion* (1919); *The Life and Times of Sir Alexander Tilloch Galt* (1920); and *The Life and Letters of Sir Wilfrid Laurier* (1921). More pertinently, in his neglected *General Economic History of the Dominion, 1867-1912*, published in the *Canada and its Provinces* series in 1912, he had attempted one of the first essays in Canada's international economic relations.

3. G.H. Ford, ed., *The Making of a Secret Agent: The Pickersgill Letters* (Toronto, 1948; repr. 1978).

4. O.R. Holsti and J.N. Rosenau, "The Meaning of Vietnam: Belief Systems of American Leaders", *International Journal*, XXXII (Summer 1977), p. 456.

merely fanciful or fictitious. I do not ascribe to it the cultural meaning offered by a Levi-Strauss. I use it in the sense employed by Walter Lippmann: an interpretation of the past that men believe to be true. "The distinguishing mark of a myth", he wrote, "is that truth and error, fact and fable, report and fantasy, are all on the same plane of credibility. . . . The myth is . . . not necessarily false. It might happen to be wholly true. It may happen to be partly true. If it has affected human conduct a long time, it is almost certain to contain much that is profoundly and importantly true."⁵ The term defined, let us attempt to identify some of the deep-seated memories of the past that have influenced the formulation of Canada's external relations.

There would not, I am sure, be any disagreement over the first and greatest of the "lessons" from Canadian history. To everyone who has thought about Canada's place in the world, from Macdonald to Trudeau, it is, one might say, *sui generis*. It was given classic expression by Louis St. Laurent in his first major statement as foreign minister in 1947: the principle that "external policies shall not destroy our unity".⁶ Principally, this lesson has been considered in the context of relations between English and French-speaking Canadians, but it has other applications arising out of the need for balance between regional and group interests in Canada. There are many instances of respect for this rule, from the Confederate Council of Trade in 1865 to the Canadian Trade and Tariffs Committee of today.

The necessity to steer a course in foreign policy between the interests of the two charter linguistic groups is not really affected by the view one holds of the place of the French-speaking minority in Canada. For most of the history of Canada, the great gulf in perceptions of the outside world has lain between Quebec and the other provinces. Everyone recalls Laurier's words: "We French-Canadians belong to one country: Canada; Canada is for us the whole world; but the English-Canadians have two countries, one here and one across the sea."

English-speaking Canadians have dominated the other provinces and for many years they determined the primary focus of Canada's external attitudes. This was most apparent on issues of "high politics", such as the country's participation in the South African War and in the First Great War. The conscription crisis of 1917 challenged this approach. It was, to use Sylva Gelber's expressive metaphor, "the blade which separated . . . brutally the two founding races . . . leaving a wound which no longer bleeds but whose scar is still all too clearly visible."⁷

Everyone in public life, whether concerned with domestic or external affairs, drew conclusions from the frightening spectacle of 1917, and none less than W.L. Mackenzie King. The moral he took confirmed what he already felt in his bones:

5. Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, p. 80.

6. L.S. St. Laurent, "The Foundations of Canadian Policy in World Affairs", Gray Lecture, University of Toronto, 13 January 1947 (Toronto, 1947), p. 19. The entire lecture reveals a strong sense of Canada's historical experience.

7. *The Citizen*, Ottawa, 16 September 1977.

HISTORY AND CANADA'S EXTERNAL POLICIES

that Laurier had exhibited the wisest approach to the handling of Canada's foreign relations. It was not only Laurier's conviction that external affairs must be treated in such a way as to prevent "divisions on racial lines", but that the best way of achieving this was by the "blocking of . . . plans", whether they originated in London, Toronto, or in military circles in Ottawa.⁸ The tragic final years for Laurier gave these lessons a particular poignancy for Mackenzie King. The moral was reiterated, complete with citations, for the novice prime minister, as Professor Stacey has pointed out, by Laurier's biographer. O.D. Skelton never allowed King to forget the political slogan of 1921: "Toujours fidèle à Laurier." King adopted and applied, with a measure of skill we can appreciate today, Laurier's negative strategy. What is prevented, not what is accomplished, represents the highest statesmanship. In foreign affairs, as in domestic, King noted in his diary in 1944, his task had been to avoid "wrong courses of evil and the like". This was the lesson that was emerging from the current war.⁹ The "wrong courses of evil" were those which damaged unity: "centralized Imperial control", as the Liberals had described it in 1919, imperial defence co-operation, the League of Nations acting coercively, Canada behaving as an innovator in international affairs. The path was tortuous, the rhetoric ambiguous, the explanations unconvincing, but, under King, unity was preserved. There was a consciousness of history here that for King and most of those around him formed an irreducible reality.

In our generation the lesson of unity has been given additional applications in foreign affairs. After 1945 the perception of unity secured buoyed the country's advance out into the world. "A disunited Canada", said St. Laurent, "[would] be a powerless one."¹⁰ Canada took a prominent part in creating new multilateral institutions for the resolution of conflict, for the freeing of world trade, for the establishment of a regional system of collective security. This unaccustomed activity was powerfully aided by an apprehension of common danger, the Soviet Union, which was shared by all groups of Canadians following 1945. In another sense it represented a revised reading of Canadian history, a conviction that trials had been surmounted and that opportunities offered in which unity could be employed for large purposes. Under the Trudeau administration (foreshadowed under L.B. Pearson), the application of the lesson of unity to foreign affairs has been extended still further. The view was then advanced that international policies themselves might promote Canadian unity. This has meant formulating a foreign policy that will more adequately reflect the aspirations of the francophone minority in Canada. Thus the effort has been made to attract more francophones into the management of foreign affairs while at the same time reaching out to establish contact and provide support for the new French-speaking states of the Third World. Again, a standard memory of the past has been touched, although fresh conclusions have been taken from it.

8. O.D. Skelton, *Life and Letters of Sir Wilfrid Laurier* (Toronto, 1921; repr. 1965), II, p. 109.

9. J.W. Pickersgill and D.F. Forster, eds., *The Mackenzie King Record, 1944-1945*, (Toronto, 1968), p. 272.

10. L.S. St. Laurent, "The Foundations of Canadian Policy in World Affairs", p. 21.

A second lesson drawn from the past has been as instrumental as the need to preserve unity in determining our foreign initiatives. This memory can be succinctly expressed in the notion of "the counterweight". Isolated in North America, close beside a restless and expanding power for most of her history, Canada has always felt the need to maintain counterweights to the United States. This has meant the continuance of links outside the Western Hemisphere, the European dimension of Canadian history that so pervasively distinguishes our experience from that of the United States.

The original tie with Britain was the uncomplicated connection between a cluster of colonies and its metropolitan power. After the partition of North America, the British fragment stood in grave danger at several moments over the next three generations. The United States launched two military offensives upon Canada; it fished in the troubled waters of Canadian rebellion; it clearly enunciated its abhorrence over the persistence of obsolete monarchical institutions in the New World. By the mid-century it was casting covetous eyes on what central Canadians had come to regard as their patrimony: the Northwest. In these circumstances the British connection was vital and was made comfortably manifest by the presence of the regulars at points from Halifax to Fort Garry. Even after most of the regulars had been withdrawn, Britain's pledge to assist Canada in the event of attack remained. There is plenty of evidence that can be drawn from the later nineteenth century to reveal that this was no insincere promise. To Canadians a realization of the benefits of membership in a world empire underlay most of the thinking about the options open to Canada as she began to define her place in the world. It gave substance to Sir John Macdonald's assessment that there existed an unwritten "alliance" between Canada and Britain.¹¹

So the British connection continued throughout the last years of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. It became an increasingly indefinable compound of politics, economics and sentiment, the whole suffused by the glow of monarchy, especially in the last days of the old Queen. Of course there were Canadians and Englishmen who wished to tighten the knot, to make Macdonald's alliance more explicit. But for the majority the reading of Canadian history seemed to bring out the importance of having decisions affecting Canadian lives and prospects made in Canada. "Federation or separation", threatened the proponents of imperial unity, but this stark choice left most Canadians unmoved. The counterweight continued to be valued, as did the conviction that it must be placed some distance from Canada along the arm of the scales. This was true during the First Great War and after, when Borden and Meighen experimented with notions of "continuous consultation" and "concerted action". It was less true during the Depression when R.B. Bennett, for a variety of reasons, sought to reconstruct the commercial system of an earlier period. The reality of the counterweight, defined as Canada's European

11. Macdonald often used "alliance" to describe Canada's relationship with Britain. D.M.L. Farr, *The Colonial Office and Canada, 1867-1887* (Toronto, 1955), p. 18, *passim*.

HISTORY AND CANADA'S EXTERNAL POLICIES

connection, was dramatically illustrated in 1939, just as it had been in 1914. The constitutional procedures for involvement were different but the impetus for decision sprang from the same sentiment and sense of shared interests across the Atlantic. It was only later, when Western Europe's weakness stood revealed, that Canada entered into continental defence arrangements with her American neighbour.

The notion of the counterweight remains as an abiding value drawn from our view of the past. Britain and the British Empire have been replaced by the Commonwealth, to some Canadians a ghost of empire, to others a substitute, to others an instrument, in Arnold Smith's phrase, "to help shape the future".¹² It has been said that the features of the British Empire that Canada wished to retain she embodied in the Commonwealth. If this is true, then one of those elements was the conviction that the Commonwealth offers Canada a window looking out from North America. Our present prime minister has no regard for the Commonwealth as a survival of the Empire, but he has enormous respect for it as a place for dialogue with the Third World, with peoples that until recently have existed beyond Canada's horizons. Thus the desire for a counterpoise is still evident, not in nineteenth century military and political terms, but in the more fluid context of contemporary international politics.

Canada's participation in NATO can be interpreted as an application of the lesson of the counterweight. So can the Trudeau government's *Foreign Policy for Canadians* (1970), which recommended a wider orientation for Canada's foreign activities. Policy attention was to move out from the North Atlantic region to encompass the Pacific rim countries, China, Latin America, the Soviet Union. Mitchell Sharp's "Third Option" holds out trade diversification as a means of reducing Canada's vulnerability vis-à-vis the United States. Mr. Trudeau's "contractual link" with the European Economic Community (1976) illustrates the same goal of establishing economic counterweights. There is, it appears, no question of the continued vitality of one of the oldest lessons from the record of Canada's external activities.

It is sometimes overlooked that Canada, alone of all the territories in the British Empire with the exception of the Cape and India, shared a frontier with a foreign country. That this state was frequently hostile to the British North American colonies, for their own sake and because they belonged to an unfriendly power, enormously complicated Canada's progress to nationhood. It introduced, at all times and across the entire range of Canada's relations with the United States, a deep-seated apprehension regarding American intentions and a quick sensitivity concerning the separate identity of the colonies. At the same time it was widely recognized in the British provinces that there were substantial benefits to be gained from a vigorous economic interplay across the border. The conjunction of the two factors gave rise to the most persistent Canadian dilemma: how much economic integration can be permitted before the political boundary becomes meaningless?

12. Quoted in J.B.D. Miller, *Survey of Commonwealth Affairs, Problems of Expansion and Attrition, 1953-1969* (London, 1974), p. 511.

The question does not seem to have been asked under the prosperous impact of the Reciprocity Treaty in the mid-nineteenth century, but it emerged as a potent issue during the debates over Commercial Union thirty years later. Macdonald pinned the label of "veiled treason" on the Liberals' unrestricted reciprocity in 1891, surely the most successful demonstration of the "guilt by association" tactic in Canadian history. Even Edward Blake, in his "West Durham letter" of the same campaign, felt there was a logical progression from reciprocity to Commercial Union and then to political union, and that his party had been less than honest in not making this plain. Through these admonitions the lesson of the political dangers of free trade entered the Canadian consciousness. The reciprocity election of 1911 threw this conclusion into sharper relief, a warning signal to all who dealt with the American relationship. The legend of the "slippery slope" had been born.

We have solid confirmation, from the pages of the Mackenzie King diary, of how this view of the past continued to influence attitudes. The instance occurred in 1948 when there was a proposal for a free trade area between Canada and the United States. Embraced by officials in both capitals, the scheme at first seemed to win the approval of the aged prime minister. Then Mackenzie King's doubts grew as memories of 1911 and the fate of the Laurier administration flooded into his mind. In his diary he recorded: "I pointed out my experience in Laurier's Cabinet re reciprocity . . . the fears that would be aroused if the matter was sprung suddenly . . . if agreed to by both political parties in the United States, fears would be greater than otherwise. Would have old questions of commercial union and annexation, etc., brought up again."¹³ In this case history was used by an old man to justify what he already sensed instinctively: that free trade with the United States would be an "unwise step", for his party and for Canada.

In our day, with the need for new economic policies starkly challenging, the "slippery slope" continues to haunt the makers of policy. Writing his "Options for the Future" paper in 1972, Mitchell Sharp raised doubts as to whether his "Second Option" (closer integration with the United States) would be compatible with Canada's political independence. "The experience of free trade areas . . . suggests . . . that they tend to evolve toward more organic arrangements and the harmonization of internal economic policies. More specifically, they tend towards a full customs and economic union as a matter of internal logic. A Canada-United States free-trade area would be almost certain to do likewise".¹⁴

The recent record of free trade areas, whether they be multilateral (the European Free Trade Association) or bilateral (Britain and Ireland, Australia and New Zealand), does not support Mr. Sharp's forebodings. Indeed it has been argued that in the case of "disparate dyads" (two partners of unequal size) "the more the smaller actor perceives the system to be integrating, the more the

13. J.W. Pickersgill and D.F. Forster, eds., *The Mackenzie King Record*, IV, 1947-1948, (Toronto, 1970), p. 269.

14. Mitchell Sharp, "Canada-U.S. Relations: Options for the Future", *International Perspectives*, Special Issue (Autumn 1972), p. 15.

HISTORY AND CANADA'S EXTERNAL POLICIES

integrative process is likely to be resisted or reversed."¹⁵ The question is obviously a complex one; what is certain is that contemporary analysis by social scientists has not dispelled the legend of the "slippery slope".

Another lesson from Canada's past which has enjoyed considerable currency in Canadian foreign policy circles over the years has been the notion of Canada acting as a "linch-pin" or "bridge" between the two great centres of the English-speaking world. Both are static concepts: the linch-pin, simply by existing at the end of the axle, keeps the wheel from flying off; the bridge, as a cynic commented, exists to be walked upon and over. Other observers have seen Canada as a prisoner of her position: "a hostage for the good behaviour of England to the United States", as Sir Richard Cartwright expressed it in the nineties.¹⁶ Perhaps a metaphor more flattering to Canadian sensibilities is "interpreter", implying an active role, where there is an opportunity for the exercise of discretion. However one characterizes the function, the fact that it has been continually set forth as a solemn duty for Canada brooks no dispute.

From its earliest forays abroad, Canadian diplomacy has been animated by a desire to contribute towards good relations between the United States and Great Britain. Expressed negatively, the approach has meant that Canada has sought to avoid taking a position in which she would have to choose between the larger countries. John A. Macdonald, for all his frustration over the Treaty of Washington (1871), presented it to the Canadian people with the claim that it made for a peaceful environment in which Canada could thrive. Sir Robert Borden stated in 1911 that "Canada's voice and influence should always be for harmony and not for discord between our Empire and the great Republic." She should, in fact, always be "a bond of abiding friendship".¹⁷ Borden earnestly pursued this duty, especially in the early years of the First Great War, although he was wise enough to see that there were moments, when the great powers disagreed over vital issues, when it was prudent for Canada to keep her views to herself. The high point of Canada's espousal of the "interpreter" role came at the Imperial Conference of 1921 when Arthur Meighen urged that Canada's voice be given special weight in any discussions between the British Empire and the United States. Meighen proceeded to apply his maxim to the question of the renewal of the Anglo-Japanese alliance which he attacked on the grounds that its continuance was unwelcome to the United States. His position won acceptance, giving a heady (if brief) note of success to Canada's performance of the interpreter role.

Mackenzie King tried his hand at the same task, although with less spectacular success. He was a cautious intermediary in the tripartite trade negotiations between Great Britain, the United States and Canada in 1937 and 1938. King also acted as a middleman between Roosevelt and Churchill over several topics in the critical period before the United States entered World War II.

15. P.V. Lyon, "Canada-United States Free Trade and Canadian Independence", a study for the Economic Council of Canada (Ottawa, 1975), p. 20.

16. Canada, *Debates of the House of Commons*, XLI, 5 February 1896, col. 1196.

17. Quoted in C.P. Stacey, *Canada and the Age of Conflict, A History of Canadian External Policies, I, 1867-1921* (Toronto, 1977), p. 151.

It was a task he approached with trepidation. Perhaps the most significant example of the "bridge-building" function in the Second World War occurred in the field of international finance. Here Canada, an important war-time creditor to Western Europe, dealt from strength. In the negotiations leading to the Bretton Woods agreement (1944) establishing the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, her officials played a constructive part in helping to meld important features from the American and British monetary plans.¹⁸ But as the post-war British-American "special relationship" emerged, the opportunities for Canadian liaison declined. The lesson that Canada could undertake useful mediatory diplomacy came more and more to be identified with the concept of the "middle power". Its venue was in the United Nations, as in the negotiations over a truce in Korea or peacekeeping after Suez, or in the Commonwealth, as shown in the conferences at Lagos and Singapore. A skill had been perfected, the exercise of which contributed to the achievements of the early post-war years, the period which Escott Reid has called "the golden age" of Canadian diplomacy. In these particular circumstances, the "interpreter" was translated into the "helpful fixer".

The belief that Canada had a contribution to make to Anglo-American accommodation also possessed its note of suffering. This was represented in the view that throughout her history Canada had served as a sacrifice to the greater purposes of Anglo-American harmony. The "sacrifice theory" of British diplomacy in North America went back long before Canada existed as an identifiable state. It sprang from the successive border settlements following the Maine-New Brunswick dispute in the 1830's and 1840's. The Oregon controversy of 1846 seemed to confirm its validity, although the Canada of that day had virtually no interest in the basin of the Columbia River. But it was the Alaska boundary issue, with its exaggerated expectations for Canada of the value of the territory in dispute, that enshrined the view of Canada as a sacrificial lamb on the altar of Anglo-American friendship. Perhaps there is a certain satisfaction derived by countries who feel themselves to be martyrs. Indignation combines with the virtuous conviction that one has suffered for the greater good.

The "sacrifice theory" shows how a view of history can be used for different purposes. It was expounded by two groups of publicists at the opening of the century. On the one hand, imperialists such as G.T. Denison and Andrew Macphail emphasized it to illustrate the need for Britain to consult Canada in the making of the Empire's foreign policy. On the other hand, autonomists such as John S. Ewart felt that the emotion surrounding the imperial tie masked a recognition of the mistakes of British diplomacy in North America. Canada was defenceless against the United States, thundered Sir Richard Cartwright in 1896, because of the "savage stupidity" of British statesmen in dealing with the United States following the Revolution. To both parties the lesson was plain: the Dominion was entitled to exercise a co-equal voice with Britain in shaping the Empire's policies in the Western Hemisphere.

18. Roy F. Harrod, *The Life of John Maynard Keynes* (London, 1951), pp. 541-42, *passim*.

HISTORY AND CANADA'S EXTERNAL POLICIES

Now that the debate over separate foreign policies for the members of the old Empire has been concluded, it is difficult to estimate the significance of the "sacrifice theory". One thing is clear. It has determined the Canadian interpretation of the nineteenth-century boundary disputes with the United States. Ask most Canadians why Canada forfeited the Alaskan panhandle and the answer will be that Britain gave it up to please the Americans. Sitklan and Kannaghunut islands, which were transferred to the United States in 1903, are bare worthless rocks, but everyone is outraged that in the settlement Canada lost valuable territory. Why is land so sacred to the sovereign state? Resources can be offered and sold to foreigners, capital sent out of the country, people lost through emigration, but the cession of "a few acres of snow" is deemed a national disaster. For proof, consider the positions struck in the current fisheries and continental shelf disputes with the United States. The credulous would imagine that every square mile of water and seabed in question is rich in scallops or petroleum. Historians have much to account for in articulating the peculiar set of values that makes this so; they have, after all, been the most energetic purveyors of the "sacrifice theory".

The memories of Canada's past with which we have been dealing are cumulative memories, emerging from a long span of historical experience. But there are other memories, arising more directly from particular events, that have also influenced Canadian policy-makers. The shock of world depression and the drift to war in the thirties had an impact on an entire generation of Canadians which cannot be overestimated. Here was an economic collapse of unprecedented severity, damaging domestic economies and paralyzing the international flow of goods, capital and people. All sorts of lessons were drawn from it, as we know, but one was received with special force by Canadians concerned with their country's foreign relations. This was the conviction that every effort should be made, at the first opportunity, to restore a liberal world trading system based on dependable currency exchange rates.

The United States trade agreement in 1935 provided a chance for a start, but the real opportunity did not arise until the latter days of the Second World War. When it came, it was seized by a small group of ministers and officials in that extraordinary war-time cabinet of Mackenzie King to advance its views of what was necessary for a functioning, international, economic order. Bretton Woods, Havana, Chicago, Geneva, Washington represent the milestones along the route to this objective. This was the great age of Canadian activity in "community building", a time when hopes were high that institutions could be created which would forever prevent a relapse into the conditions of the thirties. The Canadian approach was grounded on the realization of the country's historic position as an exporter, but it was more directly influenced by Canada's difficulties during the recent Depression. There was, it should be noted, a special effort to draw the United States into the institutions of the new international system, both for the sake of their future stability and as a means of correcting what were seen as wrong-headed American economic policies in the thirties.

Other lessons were drawn from the failure of the League of Nations. The

memoirs of Canadian diplomats which, happily, we are receiving in greater abundance these days, uniformly recount the uneasy, even disenchanting, experience of witnessing the collapse of Woodrow Wilson's noble experiment at Geneva. Most of the advisers on Canadian foreign policy after the Second World War had been young men in the thirties, representatives of the "Munich generation". Lester Pearson's experience is pertinent. He had served with W.A. Riddell at the League of Nations during the early months of the oil sanctions crisis of 1935. Thirty-five years later, Pearson chose to remember the Italo-Ethiopian conflict as "the most important international crisis between the wars", the confirmation that "only by collective international action . . . and . . . a . . . limitation of national sovereignty . . . [could] peace and security be established and maintained, and human survival ensured." Canada's failure in 1935 to stand up to "a single aggressor", he went on, "had much to do with the world war in 1939".¹⁹ Others drew similar lessons from the Munich settlement. "Appeasement" gained a connotation of opprobrium in the Western world's consciousness which has haunted its meaning ever since. No historical analogy has been more widely and indiscriminately employed by post-1945 foreign policy-makers. Whatever the validity of the historical example of "appeasement", one conclusion can be drawn. The notion that aggression can only be checked by collective action, that responsible members of the world community must be prepared to assume commitments, passed deep into the psyche of the post-war practitioners of Canadian diplomacy.

Another memory that has had a strong appeal for Canadians in the twentieth century is the belief that relations with the United States rest on a different plane from all other bilateral relationships. They are seen as characterized by civilized, even rational, procedures and animated by a deep sense of fraternity. The record of the peaceful settlement of Canadian-American disputes is claimed as a model for the emulation of other, less-favoured states. Some commentators have linked this principle of reciprocal beneficence with isolationism, particularly as it was expressed during the twenties, but it also sprang from the desire, in the early days of the American republic, to reject what were considered the obsolete and immoral practices of Old World diplomacy. Its point of departure is the Rush-Bagot agreement of 1817, which set levels for naval strength on the Great Lakes and Lake Champlain. Over the years this arrangement for modest disarmament became invested with all the significance of a comprehensive mutual and balanced arms limitation. This was a faulty reading, as Professor Stacey has reminded us. Land competition in border armaments continued and did not subside until after the Treaty of Washington in 1871. Thus the actual course of events, even though it left substantial stone fortifications all along the border to mark its reality, failed to counteract the prevailing view of history. The "undefended border" became part of the orthodox canon of Canadian history for the rest of the century. It was joined, early in the next, by an innovative mechanism that has ever since been extravagantly celebrated. The International Joint Commission, with its novel supranational authority over the level and flow of boundary waters, represented a

19. Mike, *The Memoirs of the Rt. Hon. Lester B. Pearson, 1, 1897-1943* (Toronto, 1972), pp. 92, 101.

HISTORY AND CANADA'S EXTERNAL POLICIES

constructive, if specialized, departure in the conduct of interstate relations. Its immediate context was the gentle internationalism of The Hague peace conferences and the rash of arbitration and humanitarian agreements negotiated in the early years of this century. But it also had deep North American roots in the mixed boundary commissions which had functioned since Jay's Treaty (1794) and the many joint commissions on fisheries and other practical questions, which had effectively carried out their tasks over the years.

The combination of an early agreement on disarmament and a successful mechanism for the resolution of fence-line disputes proved irresistible to men of good-will in the first years of our century. Articulated by journalists and academics, lent prestige by the advocacy of judges and politicians, the "North American Idea" was born. It held out the promise that, through the use of pacific procedures in bilateral disputes, a golden age of inter-state relations could be ushered in.²⁰ Mackenzie King embraced the idea before the First World War, doubtless seeing in it a reflection of his own enlightened prescriptions for the settlement of industrial disputes.

Although plans for the celebration of the centennial of the Treaty of Ghent in 1914 as the "year of peace" had, unfortunately, to be set aside, the "North American Idea" re-emerged in the 1920's. The annual address of the Canadian delegate to the General Assembly of the League of Nations usually drew heavily upon it and King made it a cornerstone of his public and private approaches to the United States between the wars. The agreements of Ogdensburg and Hyde Park, in years of peril, gave it substance, placing it in the context of continental military and economic necessities. Today, although the well-intentioned naïveté of an earlier period has been abandoned, the conviction that the two countries meet their bilateral problems in a unique way remains an article of faith with the diplomatic managers of the relationship. Indeed, such emphasis is placed on the pragmatic and rational processes of inter-governmental discussion that the possibility of resolving a stubborn issue through recourse to arbitration is seen as an admission of failure. The maritime boundary disputes of the seventies are regarded, by those charged with negotiating their solution, as contemporary tests of this respected principle. Bilateral questions continue to be regarded, not as subjects for confrontation, but as problems to be solved within agreed conditions. This assumption appears to be the legacy, certainly on the Canadian side, of the view that Canadian-American relations have never possessed a conventional diplomatic character.

The final aspect of the historical consciousness of Canadians that I will touch upon concerns the style of Canada's diplomacy. We have not been a country given to the grand gesture, to the ringing affirmation of principles as a prelude to action. Our methods have been empirical, concerned with finding solutions to specific issues, characterized, in Carl Berger's apt phrase, by "day-to-day opportunism".²¹ Partly this approach has derived from our size within the portion of

20. Donald M. Page, "Canada as the Exponent of North American Idealism", *American Review of Canadian Studies*, III (Autumn 1973), pp. 30-46.

21. Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History, Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing: 1900-1970* (Toronto, 1976), p. 36.

the world we have lived in, partly from the British parliamentary tradition but mainly, I suggest, from our experience in achieving nationhood by gradual means. We sought no dramatic break with Britain and self-government, when it come in its domestic garb, was ringed around with restrictions. We accepted the restraints and began to circumvent them or to undermine them as the need arose and as circumstances permitted. To a generation of historians between the wars, the attainment of self-government was regarded as "slow, continuous and analogous to the processes of organic evolution".²² While this characterization conveys a process too pre-determined for our contemporary vision, it brings out the important point that Canada's tactics in her constitutional development were often designed to be of a flanking nature. The more realistic autonomists, such as Mackenzie King and John Dafoe, recognized the utility of this approach whereas the doctrinaires, such as John S. Ewart, did not.²³ The significance of Canadian initiatives often lay in the fact that they were well ahead of the legal or constitutional positions of the times. Definition continually lagged behind practice.

There were lessons here for the attainment of objectives in external affairs as well. One was to employ informal means rather than to state objectives, to frequent the corridors of power rather than the offices in which it sat. Thus the Canadian emphasis on "quiet diplomacy" in the sense that the originator of the phrase, Dag Hammarskjöld, intended it to be used. Another lesson was to concentrate upon specific issues towards the resolution of which the country had something to contribute: the concept of "functionalism", embraced for a time by Mackenzie King. The search for the middle way, the compromise, so carefully nurtured through domestic history, also reflected the pragmatism which Canada transferred to her foreign activities. Margaret Mead once suggested that the typically British verb was "cope", the typical American one "fix". Canada's action word, James Eayrs has added, might well be "adapt".²⁴ Guided by this approach, Canada played a leading role in "adapting" the Empire into an association of self-governing white Dominions under a common Crown; then helped to "adapt" it into a multi-racial Commonwealth, many of whose members were republics. Buttressing these methods was the well-known Canadian scepticism about absolutes, the feeling that at home and abroad there were no easy solutions. Thus the Cold War, to Canadian eyes, was never as black and white as it appeared to foreign policy-makers in other capitals. A style of operation derives from many sources, but one of the most important is surely the memory of what has been effective in the past.

Presidential addresses to this Association normally conclude with a call for action on the working face of our subject. I intend to follow this practice. My message is straightforward and can be encapsulated in a word: *access*. Most histo-

22. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

23. D.M.L. Farr, "John S. Ewart", in R.L. McDougall, ed., *Our Living Tradition, Second and Third Series* (Toronto, 1959), pp. 209-11.

24. James Eayrs, *Northern Approaches, Canada and the Search for Peace* (Toronto, 1961), p. 8.

HISTORY AND CANADA'S EXTERNAL POLICIES

rians need public records, historians of foreign relations especially. Public documents, essentially, are public property; access to them should be regarded, not as a favour granted by their custodians, but as the right of a citizen. Governments should be obliged to make the case for withholding documents rather than the researcher having to establish his claim to them. It is unsatisfactory for an investigator to be told that because a document he wishes to examine is only twenty-five years old he cannot see it. It is humiliating for a Canadian historian to have to go to Washington to find Canadian material that he knows is in the files of his own government. It is inequitable that an enquiry for materials at one agency will be rejected out of hand while an enquiry for materials at another will be met with ready co-operation. There are far too many pieces of paper originating throughout the public service that are given inflated security classifications which put them beyond examination by outsiders. These conditions are intolerable and cry out for change. More liberal access to public records is an aim which the historical fraternity should endorse with all conviction as a condition of life.

There are many improvements that could be made in the present regulations governing access to public documents. We need a wider definition of what constitutes a "public record" under the Public Records Order (1966). It is unfortunate, for instance, that records of the agency or proprietary corporations (the crown corporations) are not included within this definition. It is time to consider shortening the "Thirty Year Rule", now operative for almost a decade. Social historians need permission, under controlled conditions, to consult microdata, such as the original records of the census, at an identifiable individual level. The Secretary of State's Green Paper on Public Access, issued last year, made some sensible suggestions about classes of material that should be exempt from public examination. If these suggestions are ever incorporated in legislation, it will be necessary to keep them under review. Experience may suggest changes, which a central body should be authorized to propose. The Advisory Council on Public Records, upon which this Association and other scholarly users of public documents are represented, might be an appropriate group to carry out this function. It should also look at whether there might be terminal dates for classes of exemptions, as exists in the United Kingdom.

The Advisory Council might also provide leadership and co-ordination in devising schedules for the release and regular declassification of public records. The physical labour in declassification will be so immense that it will be necessary to devote additional resources and working space to it. But the process must be commenced before we are defeated by its very magnitude. Perhaps in doing it, we may come to feel that automatic declassification is a cheaper and still practicable alternative.

Questions of access to public documents are much in the air these days. Freedom of Information legislation is promised; it is important that the Canadian Historical Association make its views known on this complex subject. The present federal Archives Act dates from 1912, the Public Records Order from 1966: both need substantial revision. This Association should be vigilant to ensure that the vital interests of historians are recognized in the legislative and administrative changes that must eventually be brought about.

Having issued these admonitions, let me add a word of praise. There are two departments of particular interest to historians of Canada's foreign relations: External Affairs and National Defence. Both have historical divisions which, under enlightened leadership, have become models of constructive access policy. They have shown sympathy to the needs of the historian by helping him or her find documents, by releasing material, by providing space to work, by publishing primary materials and histories. It is remarkable that in two of the most sensitive areas of government operations, foreign affairs and defence, such a broad-minded approach should be found. External Affairs and National Defence deserve our gratitude for their acceptance of the principle that it is important to consult the scholarly users of records in defining and applying access policy. Other departments should be encouraged to follow their ways and provide means by which the requirements of scholarly researchers can be expressed. Early consultation may well avoid later strains in what is often a delicate relationship.

In Centennial Year, when to Canadians the world seemed young and problems surmountable, the London *Economist* paid tribute to the country's record in foreign affairs. "The community of nations has learned that it needs an active Canada; as an intermediary . . . as a factor that moderates the disproportion between American and European strengths in the Atlantic world; as a dispassionate . . . participant in projects . . . based on a tenuous international consensus."²⁵ Granted the inevitable gap between objectives and practice, this was not a bad summing-up of the purposes of those who had laboured to construct a foreign policy for Canada since the Second World War. Canadians, by and large, have taken pride in the role attempted. It has been distinctive, reflecting a national identity, perhaps a cause and a consequence of a trans-Canadian sense of community. It is my hope that Canadian historians will come to possess more assured means to study this experience in all its ramifications, not to glorify it but to understand, through it, more of the truth about their country.

25. Quoted by T.A. Hockin in "Foreign Policy for Canadians: Comments on the White Paper", *Behind the Headlines*, XXIX (August 1970), p. 10.

Résumé

On se propose ici de discuter de la place qu'a tenue l'histoire dans l'élaboration de la politique extérieure du pays en se référant principalement aux années d'après la deuxième guerre mondiale.

L'auteur s'arrête d'abord aux "leçons" qui se dégagent de cette histoire, tant celles qui sont issues de la mémoire collective que celles qui résultent d'un événement particulier. Dans le premier groupe figurent l'importance de l'unité nationale, le besoin de faire contrepoids aux Etats-Unis et la conscience grandissante du rôle d'intermédiaire que le pays est appelé à jouer de par la place singulière qu'il a toujours occupée entre la Grande-Bretagne et les Etats-Unis. Au chapitre des événements, l'auteur s'attarde à la dépression des années trente, à l'échec de

HISTORY AND CANADA'S EXTERNAL POLICIES

la Ligue des Nations, aux accords de Munich et aux relations quasi fraternelles que le Canada entretient avec son voisin du sud depuis le début du siècle.

Au fil des ans et des événements, un certain style de diplomatie s'est façonné. Ce style, il est empirique et discret, axé sur l'immédiat, préoccupé du juste milieu et reconnu pour sa grande capacité d'adaptation. Maints exemples sont apportés à l'appui de l'une ou l'autre caractéristique et l'auteur conclut en souhaitant que les documents, en particulier ceux qui se rapportent aux affaires extérieures du pays, deviennent de plus en plus accessibles aux chercheurs. Notre connaissance du passé en dépend.