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## Canadian History in Retrospect

W. Menzies Whitelaw

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## CANADIAN HISTORY IN RETROSPECT

W. MENZIES WHITELAW  
*Royal Military College of Canada*

As it is now about twenty years since I last presented a paper to your Association I feel somewhat like Rip Van Winkle when he returned to the scenes of his former exploits only to find that a new generation had taken over while he was supposed to have been asleep. Regarding himself no doubt as a primary source on America under George III, Rip's natural urge toward reminiscence was curbed only by the difficulty of finding an audience. He had perhaps failed to distinguish between retrospection and recollection.

On an occasion such as this, the temptation to become reminiscent is also almost overwhelming,—almost but not quite. I would fain, however, recall the long, gaunt figure of General Cruikshank, off in a corner of the students' room at the Archives, pecking out, year by year, with one bony finger on a typewriter almost as worn, but quite as dauntless as himself, the story of the Niagara Frontier: In the center of that same room (itself the centre of Canadian Historiography) I can see Mr. Burt, driving home an argument with the small end of his trusty briar; I recall the hum of Balliol accents rolling through the open transoms at the University of Toronto; I can see Mr. Innis, just back from the wars, with a passion for truth making corrections in eighteenth century manuscripts; and Dr. Doughty out on one of his predatory rounds, with acquisitive techniques to meet all occasions; and Mr. Sage, mellowing away from both Oxford and Toronto, on the mild shores of the Pacific; and Mr. Harvey, down by that other sea, combing Acadia for ancient documents, but never quite sure where to stop; and, not far from where we now meet, Mr. Adair, hot on the trail of some stouter adversary, prepared to take on, with equal abandon, both the quick and the dead; I recall Professor Wrong, then at the height of his power, punctilious as always both in dress and decorum, standing before a great gathering of North American historians met to do him honour in the ball-room of the Jefferson Hotel in Richmond, Virginia, looking in amazed bewilderment at an enormous brass cuspidor standing ominously between him and his audience, and which his gracious southern hosts had placed there for his sole convenience, as he came slowly to realize that he had nothing better to contribute than a very small sneeze; and along with these, and other members of Canadian History's general staff, there come to mind those other humbler historian-corporals and lance-corporals, each intent on getting just enough filling for his Master's pie. While many of these rank and file historians have long since left the service, others, I now note, have since risen to field rank. It would be interesting, it might even be useful, to pursue this subject of the rise and fall of Canadian historians. But time presses.

I should like now to adopt the method used alike by the Medieval monk and the modern scientist, but seldom, if ever, by the historian, and begin with some definitions. For these I claim no inherent validity whatsoever. They are merely used as a convenience in presenting this paper. By History I shall mean, simply, thinking about society in a specific chronological context; in other words sociology with dates put in, but the "laws of social change" left out. Canadian History I should like to define as all writing about Canada's past, whether it deals with the French, the British, or the Canadian period, and whether it is written by a Canadian, a Lithuanian, or a Patagonian, provided only it is written in the English language. Writings on Canada's past in the French language I shall designate as *l'histoire canadienne*. By Canadian Historiography I shall mean the history of Canadian History as defined above, looking upon Canadian History as a process, rather than as a product, as an enterprise rather than as a shelf full of books, in fact as a social movement taking place in time and space, with predisposing circumstances, momentum, direction, and ultimate effect, and subject, therefore, like any other social movement, to historical investigation.

It is, as I understand it, the business of the historian of history, as of all other historians, to describe and explain as best he may; but not to advise, complain, expostulate, extol, condemn, much less explode.

Canadian History to date has, I believe, consisted of two successive phases, with the dividing line not far from 1937. Adequately to understand the beginning and course of the first phase, it would be necessary to know something of (1) the physical setting, (2) the social *milieu*, (3) the climate of opinion then prevailing, and (4) the *dramatis personæ*. Geographers, political scientists, economists, sociologists and others have done much to illuminate the first two of these factors. I should like to deal with the other two, in their relation to historical writing.

In 1894 George McKinnon Wrong was appointed first incumbent of the first chair of history established at the University of Toronto. Canadian-born but Oxford-bred, his interests encompassed a wide range of what we now call the Western World. However, his focal interest was French Canada. In 1895 Charles W. Colby was similarly appointed to the newly established Kingsford chair of history at McGill University. Canadian-born but Harvard-bred, Colby's chief interest was also in the French-Canadian field. Colby came from a well-to-do Montreal family, but Wrong at least evened the score by marrying the chancellor's daughter. At the time of their appointments, Colby was 28, Wrong 34. Canadian History and Canadian historians were both young then. They have aged somewhat since. Both Colby and Wrong preferred the poignant, well-turned phrase to the precise *foot-note*. Neither had fallen under the prevailing spell of German historical scholarship. That came later. However, it is well to note that Canadian History was born in academic sur-

roundings, and has ever since found its most congenial home in the colleges and universities of Canada and the United States.

Before passing on from these two pioneers in our field, may I add two brief foot-notes to any future biographies of them: On December 12, 1955, Dr. Colby died, thus covering within the ambit of one adult life-time practically the entire range of Canadian historical writing. I hope I am wrong in asserting that no learned journal in Canada has yet commented upon this fact. With regard to Professor Wrong, I should like to record a conversation with him in 1935. It was in Toronto where the American Historical Association was meeting for the only time it has held its sessions outside of the United States. Following a lively discussion in West Hall, University College, on the history of Belgian Neutrality, in which several of the most distinguished European historians of the United States had taken part, I encountered Professor Wrong in the college rotunda and remarked on how much I had enjoyed the discussion. His cryptic reply was that he had enjoyed it more. Asked for an explanation, he told me that every one of the participants in that discussion had formerly been a student of his.

Perhaps it was Wrong's very breadth of interest that made it possible for him to see so deeply into the meaning of Canadian history. Certainly it takes no great stretch of the imagination to see a link between the neutrality of Belgium and the marching away to war of over half a million of Canada's finest, and Wrong was quick to see such links.

Of course, neither Colby nor Wrong created Canadian History out of nothing. Half a century earlier, Francis Parkman had shown what could be done by a Harvard man who was willing to leave Boston. There had been Christie and Murdoch, Dent and Morgan, and more recently Kingsford, useful compliers all, brick-makers if you will. And *l'histoire canadienne* had already pointed the way to useful provincial and parochial sources in Quebec. In Ottawa, too, Mr. Brymner had already collected, transcribed, sorted, and calendared a substantial body of documentary sources. But the Archives was soon to become more than a mere repository and disseminator of information. It became a Mecca to which there came an ever increasing number of scholars from an ever widening circle. Here in unhurried and easy intimacy we discussed our mutually interlocking problems, often with considerable heat, but never, so far as I can remember, with bitterness. Here was education at its best, international, interprovincial; education without tears, without examinations, without lectures. I have no means of comparing this central role of the Canadian Archives in the first phase of Canadian History, with its later role.

Looking back on it now I can see that the idyllic conditions then prevailing were the result of more than the geniality of our scholarly hosts or

even of our own academic virtuosity. It undoubtedly stemmed in part, perhaps in large part, from the then prevailing climate of opinion.

With the usual characterization of the early twentieth century climate of opinion, or thought pattern, and the analysis of its ingredients, I have no complaint. I should merely like to examine its bearing on the writing of Canadian History, and to suggest that the usual assumption that this climate changed at the beginning of World War I ought perhaps to be re-examined. This "thought pattern" which reached well back into the nineteenth century was dominated by biological concepts. Society tended to be thought of as alive, sometimes even as more completely organic than the individual. "Who dies if England live," revealed this concept in poetic form. But if nations were alive, if they were born and matured and died, this anthropomorphic idea made national history a form of biography, and biography has ever been one of the most attractive and rewarding forms of historical investigation. Contrariwise, the mechanistic concept of society prevailing among scholars in the late eighteenth, early nineteenth centuries had virtually sterilized the historical urge. It is perhaps significant that early Canadian History had a plethora of Histories of Canada and practically no Histories of Provinces.

The early twentieth century was a time of prevailing optimism, and nowhere more so, or with more justification, than in Canada. But optimism ordinarily leads the mind into the future and away from the past, particularly if that past were somewhat depressing. But the optimism of the early twentieth century was based on the theory of organic evolution, where present and future alike have no meaning except in the light of that slow but inevitable progress out of which both present and future alone can emerge, hence the need of history. And if Canada's immediate past were too depressing for an optimist to contemplate, these earlier Canadian historians solved their emotional problem by the simple device of ignoring the immediate past; leaving this depressing subject to the political economists. Indeed the year 1867 came to be regarded not only as the dividing line between Canada's provincial and national periods, but also as the boundary between history and the other upstart sciences. Historians were mindful of J. R. Green's warning that when the historian reaches that point in time when people who were then alive are still so, it is time to draw the curtain. With the twentieth century belonging to Canada, and progress inevitable, there was, of course, no need to push, although that might be fun, and much safer when you pushed from the rear. Certainly there seemed no necessity of turning history into veiled propaganda; we could afford to be objective and we thought we were.

The doctrine of relativity was another ingredient in the climate of opinion during this first phase of Canadian History. Taken by the untutored to mean that everything affects everything and therefore nothing can be determined about anything; it was understood by scholars, partic-

ularly by scientists, to mean that because everything affects everything, nothing that can be determined about anything can fail to help in the more complete understanding of everything. This was based on the concept of an interlocking world, in other words a universe, difficult no doubt to understand, but basically understandable throughout. To the historian it meant, in a phrase of Terence, that nothing pertaining to man should be left out when trying to understand man, or his history. This presented the Canadian historian with a choice of alternatives. Either he could continue his former intensive study of Canada's past politics, and try to reach a *modus vivendi* with the political scientists on a chronological division of the field, or he might accept the challenge to interdisciplinary cross-fertilization and become synthetic rather than analytic. I may not stop to indicate the result; but I should like to record the stimulating effect of the second choice on those Canadian historians who, working in far places where contact with other Canadian historians was difficult or impossible, nevertheless enjoyed easy access to local economists, agronomists, psychologists, soil chemists, geologists, meteorologists, physiologists, linguists, biologists, and philosophers, as well as to typical representatives of racial, religious, political, occupational and other groups and their amateur local historians. This inevitably involved a great broadening in the kind of historical investigation, and a corresponding limitation in its geographical range. It favored localism and regionalism.

I readily admit, of course, that this account of the then prevailing pattern of thought (of which historical thought formed a part) has here been over-simplified, that within this intellectual climate of opinion there was considerable emotional weather, and even deep inconsistencies within the intellectual frame-work itself, for instance between the "struggle for existence" and the Christian ethic. Nevertheless there was general agreement that "the best was yet to be" and that, in the meantime, we were the best yet.

"If you break faith with us we shall not sleep" wrote our own John McRae. Yes, but we had kept the faith. We had fought to make our world safe; and we had won. "Après la guerre" we had said during the tragic struggle; and "never again" we had vowed when it was over.

After the war we still believed in progress, but slowly and imperceptibly our analogies began to change (for society has a strangely bare vocabulary of its own, and is constantly forced back on the use of analogies from other fields.) We now began to talk of building a better world, not of planting a better civilization. Growth would be too slow. We needed our new world in a hurry. Time was of the essence. No need here to list the mounting disillusionments between the advent of Mussolini and the Munich agreement. The obvious ability of a dictator to use the techniques of science to create an intense form of nationalism was frightening. Evidently states could be made, they did not need to

grow. The concept of social mechanism began to take the place of social organism. Yet this was mechanism with a difference. It was not based on perfectionism as in the eighteenth century. Thinking moved from survival of the fittest to survival. Well before 1939 we were almost as sure that war was inevitable as prior to 1914 we were convinced that it could not happen. So great, in fact, became the strain of mounting tensions that 1939 came almost with a sense of relief. Now we would know the worst.

How did Canadian historians react to this new cyclonic climate of opinion; this belief in potential catastrophe? Certainly not as quickly as the stock-broker or the diplomat, although even they missed several boats. After all historians have always enjoyed a modicum of occupational schizophrenia. Living in two worlds, past and present, they could not have been expected to sense the first indications of climatic change. But when the present did catch up with them they reacted in characteristically different ways. Some simply left the profession and entered various types of public service. Whether the fittest survived is, of course, a moot question. Others began to shift their focus from the pre- to the post-Confederation period. Some of them even became popular. In fact they sometimes seemed to have reversed J. R. Green's warning, and decided that when they got back to a time when none of the people who were then alive were any longer so, it was time to stop. In this unfamiliar field, they seem to me at times to have failed to make the basic distinction between the distinctive and the characteristic, between the peculiar and the significant. I recall a teacher I once had who had a mole on her nose. It was quite distinctive; it was somewhat less than meaningful. Other teachers either had no mole at all or had had it elsewhere, but Euphronia was to us the lady with the mole. Reading some recent Canadian histories I have found that a Canadian is one who neither wears a monacle nor chews gum; that the one important thing about Canada is that it is bilingual, which seems to me to be both inadequate and not quite true.

A notable feature of this second phase of Canadian history has been the marked decline in the number of American students going on into graduate work in Canadian history. There has also been a noticeable divergence in the choice of fields in Canadian history selected by American and Canadian students. The growing separation, one might almost say alienation, between the mature scholars in our field on either side of the international border has increased. This answers some problems in Canadian historiography, but raises others.

Finally there has of late been a decided increase of interest in regional and local history, signalized, but by no means limited to the splendid contributions made to Canadian history last year in connection with the separate celebrations of the joint birthday of the twin prairie provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan. Worthy of particular commendation is

the bibliography of the Prairie Provinces by Bruce Peel, son of Saskatchewan but recently adopted by Alberta. Perhaps what Canada and Canadian historians alike most need is not more fear of our neighbors, be they bulldog, eagle, bear, or dragon, nor even more fear of ourselves; maybe what we really need is just more birthdays to celebrate.