

Report of the Annual Meeting Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

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Volume 9, numéro 1, 1930

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300079ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/300079ar>

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Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (imprimé)

1712-9095 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Lower, A. R. M. (1930). The Origins of Democracy in Canada. *Report of the Annual Meeting / Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada*, 9(1), 65–70. <https://doi.org/10.7202/300079ar>

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THE ORIGINS OF DEMOCRACY IN CANADA

By A. R. M. LOWER

The history of a country seems to consist in a complex of social loyalties and individual interests projected against a background of environment. The three factors compose, to borrow a mathematical term, a triangle of forces and the historian's task lies in solving the equations representing it.

In this country, as in every other, social groupings have from the beginning had an important place. As a rule they have had their political reflections, taking their place as important elements in the party system. As time has passed they have undergone interesting evolutions, usually in the direction of increasing adaptation to the conditions of the new country. In the early days, people naturally found themselves bound together by sentiments and prejudices that had their origin elsewhere than on Canadian soil. While these early bonds of society are not all dead, many of them are dying and their place is being taken by loyalties more nearly indigenous. But even to-day, the country is a sort of museum of all the movements and passions, imported or native, which have swept over it in the past.

An apt illustration of the thesis is afforded by the Orange Order in Canada. Before the large Irish immigration of the 'twenties and 'thirties of the last century, nothing was more remarkable than that amid the unceasing political and racial strife of the English and French, there should have been rarely broken religious peace. When the Irish, Protestant and Catholic, came they brought with them the loves and hates of their own country and ever since, religion has taken its place along with race as one of the elements of discord and of political strife in this country. As time has gone on, the first fine frenzies of the devotees of either faith have subsided. Twelfth of July celebration is no longer, as a rule, the occasion of a pitched battle. Even for Orangeism, a second transplantation has been rather too much and consequently in the newer parts of the country it does not flourish as it does in Ontario. The old loyalty has been sloughed off, apparently not adapted to local conditions, but a new one, the Klu Klux Klan, another alien importation but one more directly related to the problems of the day, has taken its place.

It is difficult to disentangle the elements of sentiment and emotion in an individual's social alignment from the element of reason, but the confusion between the two accounts for most of the inconsistencies in men's political behavior. Politics in Canada of all countries will never be understood until the conscious motive is separated from the unconscious. A right assessment of the two would give a very clear image of Canadian development. In such an assessment a balance would have to be struck with the second force in the triangle, self-interest, hydra-headed in the variety of its expression but too often completely anti-social.

The third factor, the physical back-ground, has not as yet been intensively studied by the Canadian historian but the triangle cannot be solved until such a study has been undertaken. Certain of its more immediate effects are sufficiently obvious. Thus the political situations arising out of our limited soil-base and consequent small population, the remoteness of one habitable section from another, the climatic difficulties con-

fronting labour, navigation and internal communication, are sufficiently patent. The more remote and intangible effects have not yet been rendered patent.

The historical deductions from geography have been worked out in some detail for the United States by American historians of the school of F. J. Turner and they have shown very well how the frontier has conditioned the whole social setting, manner of thought and political reactions of the people of their nation. Turner's thesis has not yet been thoroughly applied to Canadian history and, indeed, there are factors present in the development of each country which are inconspicuous or absent in that of the other. It must therefore be a modified or adapted version of the thesis which can be fitted to Canada.¹

Probably the most striking and important aspect of the thesis is that one which dwells on the connection between the frontier and democracy. There can be little question but that American democracy had a forest birth and there also can be little doubt of the validity of the larger thesis that the frontier environment, or life lived on the margins of civilization, tends to bring about an equality of which the political expression is democracy. But it may be doubted whether social equality could work out into political democracy unless the society possessing it had not possessed certain theoretical positions as to its nature before it was projected into its frontier surroundings. The French Canadian and the American before 1763 both were faced with the same frontier conditions and within limits both made the same response to them. Both had much social equality, much rude good comradeship, the virtues of pioneer hospitality, adaptiveness and initiative in meeting the demands of forest life. Both were restive under control, making good scouts but poor regulars. There was infinitely more independence and assertiveness in French Canada, infinitely less readiness to do the will of a superior, than in old France;² but it may be safely assumed that once the conditions which made for this independence had passed, the age-old controls of French life, the clergy and the nobility, and the pressure of authority which was in the very air of the *ancien régime* would have made themselves felt³ and the independent Canadian would have had to bow the knee in the same manner as his ancestors.

Not so the American. He had all the independence of the *coureur de bois* and something more: he had behind him the consciousness that he was a free man, that his ancestors had been free men and that his whole society stood for the rights and privileges of the individuals. Thus when pioneer conditions had passed, the attitude toward life which they had induced remained as a conscious philosophy or creed, something to be fought for. It is only with the fading of the memory of the frontier and the elevation of descendants of frontiersmen into a sort of aristocracy, at least a plutocracy, over an immigrant and alien bottom layer, that the old framework of American society tends to loosen. It has not loosened much yet but it

¹ There have been two articles in recent reports of the Canadian Historical Association dealing with the frontier in Canadian history, one by Professor W. N. Sage, *Some Aspects of the Frontier in Canadian History*, one by J. L. McDougall, *The Frontier School and Canadian History*. Both of these are mainly concerned with the physical parallels between the two countries in their frontier development.

² Note how quickly seigniorial control disappeared after 1763. In 1775, Carleton found authority both of church, seigneur and government, powerless to coerce the habitants. They had seized the opportunity which the English conquest afforded of throwing off the controls which had long been irksome to them. See on this subject Chester Martin, *Empire and Commonwealth* (Oxford, 1929, p. 170).

³ As in part they did after the Quebec Act had begun to make its pressure felt, a new set of controls, the clergy and popular tribunes, took the place of the old, and to this day, the French Canadian is much more amenable to discipline than is the English.

is doubtful if the political ideals of the original population, reinforced as they were by a most intense frontier experience, can be indefinitely passed on to a citizenry much of which has little of them in its heredity and much of which is slowly becoming a lower class.

In Canada, democracy has been even more of a condition and less of a theory that it has been in the United States. Our political ideas have been British, not American, and in British political idealism, democracy, until a recent date, had no place. In it freedom, it is true, had a large place, but a careful distinction must be made between the old English notion of freedom and the concept suggested by the word democracy. For three quarters of a century after the Loyalists came, lip-service was paid to freedom but "democracy" was discreditable, at least among the people who "mattered". It was something that caused French Revolutions or which was associated with the American tobacco chewers discovered by Martin Chuzzlewit. The whole weight of officialdom and its connections in British North America was thrown against it and only very slowly after the securing of responsible government was the disreputable personage admitted into the drawing-rooms of respectable society. Yet to-day it is the name that is above every name. Here is an interesting historical development which has not yet been traced out as completely as it might be.

The Loyalists brought with them to Canada a bitter experience of popular action. Haldimand said, perhaps truly enough, that they had had all they wanted of Assemblies. Their chief men were aristocrats. Yet in half a century their settlements were being agitated by cries for responsible government. In so far as they supported this agitation and in so far as it did not obtain its chief support from the later comers, the frontier had done its work.

But it is probably necessary to distinguish between responsible government and democratic government. So far as the writer knows, Baldwin, Papineau and Lafontaine were not enthusiasts for democracy. Mackenzie probably was and he more than any other prominent figure represents the frontier at that period. Yet in Canada, the frontier, that is, roughly, the country side as opposed to the little governmental and mercantile centres of power and influence, never scored the ringing victory of Andrew Jackson and his frontiersmen in the United States.

It is curious to reflect how little support Mackenzie received. Logically most of the province should have supported him, for most of the province must have been affected by the grievances for which the ruling class was responsible, the conditions obtaining as to land and land-grants, the Clergy Reserves, the Anglican attempts at an established church, the tyranny of the semi-official Bank of Upper Canada. Similar conditions in the United States, both before and after the Revolution, had caused serious outbreaks. Bacon's Rebellion, the Alemance fight, Shay's Rebellion, the Pennsylvania Whiskey Rebellion, are familiar examples. A similar inspiration, if not actual grievances, had been at the bottom of the triumph of the frontier in the elections of 1828. Yet here was Upper Canada and, to a lesser degree, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, suffering under more severe oppression than these others had been and to a remarkable extent taking it "lying down".⁴

The explanation is two-fold. The character of the population differed from that of the western states. The democratic spirit in its political expres-

⁴ Lower Canada cannot be included in the comparison, for although the same grievances were present and were powerfully at work, the element of race cuts across them all and it would be difficult to say how far the rebellion was racial and how far social and economic.

sion was a post-Revolutionary development in which the Loyalist migrants had not shared. Later immigrants were not completely emancipated from old world modes of life and thought. The pioneer in his day-to-day life manifested all the characteristics of his American brother⁵ except the fierce desire of the latter to control the political situation. Mackenzie, a pioneer only by courtesy, a pioneer born in Scotland and seeing the frontier from the windows of a York printing house, was not an Andrew Jackson. Again, the provincial unit was small and control in various forms was easily exerted.

Both of these factors come together and are nicely illustrated in the case of Egerton Ryerson and the Methodists. Methodism was essentially a religion of the frontier, a fact which accounts for its rapid spread through an originally non-Methodist population, and if they had been left to themselves, its adherents, many of them of Loyalist origin, would almost certainly have gravitated into the rebel camp. But it happened to have Ryerson at its head and he also was Loyalist but a Loyalist and Methodist of a more sophisticated type than the simple pioneer. Consequently, old sentiments and the old allegiance triumphed in his person and grievances or no grievances, Strachan or no Strachan, he retained the loyalty of frontiersmen and Methodists.

The events of the rebellion period are not particularly creditable to a proud people. It should logically have been a great popular movement against undoubted grievances. Instead of that, its inherited social alignments, from which much of the meaning had evaporated, took all the fire out of it.

Though, partially as a result of the rebellion, self-government came, democracy did not prevail and as late as 1867, Sir John Macdonald could vigorously and without condemnation champion a property suffrage. Property and privilege is written into the British North America Act to a much greater extent than it is written into the American constitution, itself a document far from democratic.

By 1867, the frontier of settlement in Canada had practically ceased its advance and pioneer spirits were trekking westward to the prairie states. In the Hudson Bay territories the energetic and unruly agitation of Dr. Schultz against vested interest was typifying the frontier spirit. There were also recurring in the west interesting repetitions of the democratic phenomena of many another frontier. One of the most illuminating of these was the so called republic of Assiniboia set up in the 'sixties by one Spence.⁶ Nothing of the sort seems ever to have occurred before on what is now Canadian soil but it is in the direct line of descent from the Mayflower Compact and the Watauga association. It is in the west too, that, more recently the phenomena associated with the frontier type of democracy have been most frequently in evidence. Undoubtedly influenced by similar legislation of the western states, Manitoba in 1916 attempted to set up a law for the initiative and referendum.⁷ The farmers of the west have displayed a hostility to the chartered banks, reminiscent in milder tones, of the outcry of the 'thirties against the Bank of the United States.

⁵ As for instance in the emotional nature of the religion he demanded. The Bay of Quinte Loyalists became Methodist within a few years after their arrival, and elsewhere in the country, the "old time religion" was hot, strong and violent in its displays, just as it was in the frontier districts of the United States. "Camp-meetings" sometimes came near to being veritable emotional orgies.

⁶ Joseph James Hargrave, *Red River*, Montreal, 1871, pp. 428 ff.

⁷ The statute was declared ultra vires of the Manitoba legislature by the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. See W. B. Munro, *American Influences on Canadian Government*, Toronto, 1929, p. 95 n.

It is on the prairies that the most successful revolt against the old political parties has occurred.

Despite the continuance in the west down to the present of democratic phenomena such as the foregoing, the present democratic tone of our institutions cannot be looked upon as having been an inevitable political evolution. In 1867 there was no body of opinion in favour of democracy. In fact, as has been said, opinion was in the other direction. Yet to-day our governments are responsive to the slightest breath of the air of public opinion and sometimes in their efforts to anticipate it, move ahead of it. Providing it be vocal enough, there is no class in the community that cannot force government's hand. This would not have been true sixty years ago. The problem is to account for the change.

Democracy both as a theory and a condition made great headway in Great Britain after 1867 but it is impossible to believe that British political practice had any important influence on Canadian. There was no echo in Canada of John Bright's famous campaign preceding the Second Reform Bill and no echo of the bill itself. Our democratic evolution must have come from elsewhere.

Robert Gourlay in his day made excellent fun of the provision in the Constitutional Act for a hereditary nobility in Canada and pictured the Marquis of Erie as a petty lawyer in a small country town or the Duke of Ontario observed by some passer-by in the act of getting in his own hay.⁸ Descriptions exist of the unconventionality of the Canadian Legislatures of the early days and of the illiteracy (and worse) of their members.⁹ In the state of society reflected in matter such as these, surely lies the key to the problem. You cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear and you cannot make class distinction of any permanence in a country where there is not much wealth and where everybody has started in the race for its accumulation from approximately the same point and started very recently. In other words, society in a new country is almost necessarily equalitarian and democratic, and therefore sooner or later politics must become so. If they do not, it is because the long arm of an old polity is felt stretching out toward the new. France stretched out such an arm towards Canada before 1763 and kept the new country mildly feudal. But even in feudal New France, the seigneurs had little to distinguish them from the habitants except their pride and poverty. England stretched out such an arm after 1763 and for many years kept the institutions of the new country mildly aristocratic. But when self-government came, the regime of privilege rapidly evaporated in the sun of economic equality.

It need not necessarily have been so. In a small and isolated community, where opportunity was narrow, privilege might easily have maintained itself. Probably eastern Canada alone was large enough to have avoided this, certainly the Dominion as at present constituted is, but in any case the influence of the outside world would have prevented it. With our traditions of political freedom working in the modern world, we must have come out somewhere near the point at which we have in fact arrived. Moreover we lay close to a country in which during the nineteenth century democracy was, so to speak, being continuously re-manufactured, recreated anew with every belt of new country opened up. In the tone of society as in every other particular, we were influenced by the United States and there is no doubt that the march of democracy in the United

⁸ Robert Gourlay, *Statistical Account of Upper Canada*, Vol. II, p. 296.

⁹ See *inter alia* Sir Edmund Hornby's *Autobiography*, p. 62, as reviewed in *Canadian Historical Review*, Dec., 1929.

States influenced its march in Canada. The back-wash of western democracy forced political equality in all the eastern states and by the 'forties the last property qualifications and the last established church had disappeared from New England. Its effect on Canada must have been similar, for while the boundary tends to retard the spread of ideas northward it does not stop it. It may be concluded that our own pioneering era plus the influence of American pioneer life brought about political democracy in Canada.

There were minor factors, of course. Thus in the session of 1885, Sir John Macdonald alleged as one of the reasons for his attempt to put the control of the suffrage into the hands of the Dominion Parliament, that certain provinces were widening the franchise for the simple purpose of giving votes to persons who would vote against the Tories.¹⁰ Again, party government tends to an ever widening franchise because one party bids against the other for the favour of the electorate. This remark would apply with some force to the English Second Reform Bill.

Despite American influence, there are observable differences between our democracy and that of the United States. We have never erected democracy into a creed in Canada and consequently we endure without even feeling their inconsistency, let alone injustice, such undemocratic remainders as the property suffrage in municipal politics and property qualifications for the Senate. We endure or did endure until recently, distinctions of rank that have never been tolerated in the United States. We like to think that our democracy does not shout as loud as does that of America. These differences, for the most part small, probably proceed from three causes. The first is that our frontier experience, owing to differences in habitable area, has not been as intense and prolonged as has that of the United States. We have not all been ground up quite as fine by it as the Americans. Sir John Beverley Robinson was able to keep his coach and four and to pose as grand seigneur in "Muddy York" but it is unlikely that he could have done so in contemporary Cincinnati. The second cause is that old world sentiment has been much stronger in Canada and the old world connection much more recent than in the United States. And the third lies in our monarchical form of government; in the old days we were governed and we have never quite got accustomed to governing ourselves. Government to many of us still seems a thing apart, not quite our own concern. The perpetuation of monarchical forms, even though the life has long since gone out of them, doubtless tends to act as a curb to the fullest expression of democracy. At any rate, the differences just mentioned between our democracy and that of the United States consist in a general way in this, that democracy in Canada has not had quite as thorough-going an expression as it has had amongst our neighbours.

¹⁰ See *Canada and its Provinces*, Vol. VI.