

Some Thoughts on Understanding Canadian History

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[See table of contents](#)

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ever they might appear in force. Loyalist historians, she argues, could never rid themselves of wishful thinking and self-deception. Yet her own book and those of many other recent American historians offer much evidence to show that, if the successes of 1780 and early 1781 had been sustained, popular compliance in British victory could have become permanent. Had Cornwallis obeyed his orders, had the fleet not failed off the Virginia Capes, who can say that the South might not have been held? In the words of Wellington at Waterloo, it might have been "a damn'd near thing." Exercises in self-deception are normal in war and in histories of warfare. If the Patriots had not excelled in this department and run their luck to the utmost, they could easily have lost.

The British-Americans is a needed and welcome addition to the literature of the Revolution. A note on sources is extremely useful.

W. S. MACNUTT

Some Thoughts on Understanding Canadian History

The publication of *festsschriften* in honour of Donald Creighton and Frank Underhill invites some reflection on both the current state of Canadian historiography and on the work of two historians whose careers have been so notable and yet so diverse.¹ It is, at first glance, surprising that the two should be so different. Both Creighton and Underhill were Ontario-born of British stock, and Ontario-educated. Both graduated from the University of Toronto. Both were Balliol men at Oxford, Underhill in Classics, Creighton in History. Both were reared in the political tradition and positivist philosophy of historical study; neither acquired nor used a sociological approach to history. But there the superficial similarities end. Both gave their lives to the study, teaching and writing of history, but how differently and to what different ends! The differences between the two historians were fundamental differences of mind, personality and historical practice.

Underhill was radical. The best of his mind was analytical and critical, reducing experience to discrete fragments. In effect it was destructive, although not in intent. In this, as in his style, he reflected much of the man he greatly delighted to honour — Goldwin Smith, whom he saw as one of the few first rate minds to address itself to the 'Canadian question'.² On the

1 John S. Moir, ed., *Character and Circumstance — Essays in Honour of Donald Grant Creighton* (Toronto, 1970); Norman Penlington, ed., *On Canada — Essays in Honour of Frank H. Underhill* (Toronto, 1971).

2 Underhill similarly admired André Seigfried, who possessed a not dissimilar intellect.

other hand, if Underhill had the radical's propensity to fragment, Creighton exhibits a conservative's propensity to synthesize. His mind functions from a profound sense of coherence, is immediately perceptive of the whole and apprehends the facts as members of the whole. To him coherence is the essence, analysis at best a useful exercise. He may perhaps best be seen as Burkean, with all Burke's inherent ambiguity, the organic mode of mind in which either the whole or the part, the tree or the branch, may be of eminent importance according to occasion. Allied to this quality of mind, and necessarily a part of it, is the fact that Creighton is an artist. His bent is to create rather than to criticize, to construct rather than demolish, to comprehend rather than to analyze.

Such a contrast, making Underhill the agent of fragmentation and Creighton the champion of coherence, is of course violently to caricature men of wide sympathies and great sensitivity. But, on the whole, what is known of the public lives of Underhill and Creighton does confirm this contrast and without serious modification.³ Indeed, an examination of the former's published work raises the fundamental question whether Underhill may be considered to have been a historian at all. To raise the question is not to deny his unusual gifts as a teacher of history, his liveliness of mind, or his power to comment penetratingly on events and personalities past and current. Nor is it to deny the character of a historian to one whose historical writings are confined to papers and essays, and contain not a single book written as such.⁴ But to compose a book requires a sense of coherence, a capacity to see, or even devise relationships among at first sight incoherent data. Underhill's failure to produce a book from his studies of Edward Blake came, I suspect, from his failure to perceive that Blake, for all his opaqueness of character, was not a fragmenting analyst as was Underhill, but at bottom a coherent, if tortured being. That he gave the last years of his public life to the cause of Irish nationalism suggest the observation, even if his purpose was to fragment the United Kingdom. Underhill, lacking this sense of coherence, was an Ontario Rousseau, lamenting that men, though born individuals, were everywhere in the chains of coherence, of family, tradition and nation. He often threw dazzling lights on the contradictions of Canadian pluralism, but in doing so he was much less the sober historian and more the puckish commentator.

In contrast, Creighton is historian *par excellence*. He has practised history with a skill and success no past or contemporary Canadian historian has equalled.⁵ Creighton believes that the bonds between history and literature

3 The writer believes this statement, exaggerated for effect, does not seriously conflict with what the editors of the *festsschriften* say in their excellent introductions.

4 This is evident in the extensive list of writings by Underhill in *On Canada*. At most only 233 titles, out of a total of over 1200 items of all kinds, are historical in manner and intent.

5 What is striking in the bibliography of Creighton's work in *Character and Circumstance* is that while it contains only 40 items, 8 of these are books.

are close and enduring and that the historian at his best is also artist. It is a lofty credo, which in his work he has exemplified magnificently. It possesses, however, the faults of its virtues. The artist may ignore the commonplace, the jog trot, the drudgery, the routine, which are in themselves the bulk of history. Eloquence, the best possible statement, may flow into rhetoric; the drum and beat of cadenced prose pass from the exposition of the coherent to the assertion of vision, tolerable in the artist, reprehensible in the historian. On the brink of these possibilities Creighton's history sometimes totters. In the famous description of the picnic grounds of Ontario, the eye is so dazzled by the minutiae so patiently and skillfully elaborated, by the social warmth, the languor of summer relaxation under the gentle threat of rain, that one forgets one has not been adequately informed of the social and local reasons why the good people of Ontario were given to picnicking at that period, or why they tolerated designing politicians arranging them.⁶ Moreover, Creighton in both philosophy and practice heavily stresses, to the point of over-emphasis, the place and role of character. In the passage from which the words of the title of his *festschrift* are taken he carefully states how important he thinks the place and role of personality in the play of circumstance is. In his histories, the characters are always lively agents in the historical process. This, however, is to veer towards 'a great man' history; it is also to allow the artist, one is tempted to say the novelist, to obscure the historian.

Creighton seldom, if ever, commits either fault, but the reader often feels the danger of his doing so, as one holds one's breath as a speeding express train banks on a curve. One may wonder whether the trumpet peals of triumph in *The Empire of the St. Lawrence* or the overtones of doom in *Canada's First Century* are the necessary outcome of historical study or the effects of a great artist exploiting all possibilities of a theme. In the digging of research Creighton is as demanding as he is in the travails of composition, but in his hands composition often became orchestration, and the verve of artistry sometimes quickens the judicious plodding of the historian.

If Underhill is to be taken as something less than historian, and Creighton as something more, one may ask whether the two *festschriften* in any way reflect these qualities. In *On Canada* the affinity between the character of the essays and Underhill's own work is evident. The contributions are all of high quality and well-written, some notably so, but all are commentary. The essays are not deliberately and consciously historical, and it is to be assumed they were not meant to be. The historical element is sometimes excellent, as in Graham Spry's "Public Policy and Private Pressures; the Canadian Radio League, 1930-36 and Countervailing Power," but each author is writing to a cause and advancing a theme. The tone and urgency of the

6 D.G. Creighton, *John A. Macdonald: the Old Chieftain* (Toronto, 1955), pp. 219-225.

advocate, if sometimes muted, is never absent. *Character and Circumstance* is very different. All the essays are severely historical, most of them parts of research in train, except perhaps that by K.W. McNaught, "Violence in Canadian History", which is speculative but still a historical survey, and Peter Waite's "A Point of View", which is a pertinent discussion of historical thought and the historian's craft. Although the essays reflect the interest and the character of the historian celebrated, it is fair to say that they do not to any notable degree echo Creighton's concern with history as literature and with the historian as artist. Useful as they are, none seems likely to survive as literature and no doubt none was written with a view to doing so. They are plain reports of thoughtful research — subject to correction, revision and re-interpretation.

What then have the two scholars, honoured by these books, done for the understanding of Canadian history? Unlike in mind and understanding they had this in common, that they both began with the presence of a Canada existing and established. And both saw Canada as being, for good or ill, an extension of Ontario. Neither, the reviewer feels, fully grasped the ramifications of the duality of English and French Canada. Neither had a sense of the vigour of regional sentiment in the various parts of Canada, including in their own province. Neither really came to grips with the variances of Canadian nationality, that fantastic exercise in pluralism.

Underhill, the disciple of Goldwin Smith and Dafoe, was in many aspects of his thought a continentalist rather than a nationalist. To him, however, continentalism was only one aspect of a larger theme, the restoration of the lost Anglo-American world as a cornerstone of a world order. Of course, American-Canadian continental ties in such a world were a different order of things than such ties in a North America from which all power or influence not American has been excluded since at least 1939. Underhill was closer to Dafoe than to Smith. To the latter Canada was not only an anomaly, but also an unviable one. To Dafoe, Canada was a North American nation, in which American influence was to be balanced by British. That seems to have been Underhill's position. But if Underhill was, in his own idiom, a Canadian nationalist, he was always and necessarily a frustrated nationalist. He constantly saw Canada in fragments, in regions, races, classes, and he always saw it as in itself incomplete, a drifting raft of humanity in desperate need of mooring to some larger vessel. The outlook is a significant comment on the relations of regional, continental and Anglo-American interests. Each in its own way impugns the national character of Canada. Continentalism in particular fragments Canada.

Underhill found Canada's place in world affairs disquieting. He also found the character of Canadian political society unsatisfactory. It was a society blind, apparently, to class, prone indeed to deny the existence of class in Canada, and blandly unaware that in a rational society politics is the adjust-

ment of class differences. Not that Underhill was in any sense Marxian in his outlook. He was, as were so many Oxford students of his generation and the succeeding one, subtly inoculated against Marxism, so difficult to reconcile with political democracy, by repeated injections of Fabianism, socialism without fuss or rancour. To Underhill Canadian political society was incomplete, a society yet a-borning, and he was a busy mid-wife to the Canadian Co-operative Commonwealth. To him the C.C.F. was no doubt much more a trumpet sounding from the left than a party organizing for power, but its creation was a mark of political respectability for Canada. As a historian, he saw it also as a further proof of his thesis of a radical tradition in Canadian political thought, a tradition represented by the Clear Grits and, he hoped, by the Progressives. In that thesis, as in his welcoming of the C.C.F., Underhill failed to solve the dilemma of radicalism and regionalism in Canadian history. To him, the radical was a widespread, if not universal genus, to be hailed as fellow to all other radicals. In Canada, however, radicals have in most cases been regionalists first and often last, and why this should be so is a question fundamental to the understanding of Canadian history. The agrarian radicals did not prove, as Underhill once hoped, political saviours in Canada. Few of them were in fact radicals, and the chief reasons for their failure have always seemed to the writer to have been regional. The causes of their radical protest were met regionally in regional terms, at least sufficiently to undermine most of them.

It was this failure to appreciate the regional in Canadian history that leads to the pairing of Underhill with Creighton. The most nationalist of Canadian historians, unless A.R.M. Lower is to challenge that title, Donald Creighton finds the coherence of Canada in what is called by others the Laurentian, or metropolitan thesis of Canadian history. His thesis is that Canada is no accident or leftover of history, but the deliberate and concerted development of the possibilities, economic and political, of the St. Lawrence valley and its adjunct, the maritime provinces of the Gulf, and its hinterland, the northwest to the Pacific. As developed by Creighton, with his powers of research and of characterization, the thesis is the most vivid and compelling interpretation of Canadian history yet achieved. In it Creighton found that coherent Canada which Underhill failed to find.

The reviewer's opinion of the Laurentian thesis was published over twenty-five years ago.⁷ The gist of the opinion remains as it was, that the thesis fails to take account of regional experience and history and makes coherent Canadian history seem an 'imperialist's creed', an imposition on Maritime, French Canadian, Western and British Columbian history of an interpretation which distorted local history and confirmed the feeling that union with

7 W.L. Morton, "Clio in Canada: The Interpretation of Canadian History", *University of Toronto Quarterly*, XV (1946), pp. 227-234.

Canada had been carried against local sentiment and local interests. Two harmful results followed. One was to equate local history with local grievance. The other was to obscure the fact that in every part of Canada grounds for union existed which may be documented historically, and which were expressed in the agreements for union. These two results combined to create a barrier between Canadian history written from the Laurentian point of view and the local and regional aspects of the same history.⁸

Both Creighton and Underhill, in studying Canada, focussed on its wholeness, each according to the character of his mind and outlook, one by way of fragmentation and analysis, the other by way of coherence and synthesis. Neither took sufficient account of regional factors in Canadian history and of the duality of Canada, for in Quebec regionalism is raised to the nth degree by tradition and language.⁹ This failure, if so blunt a term may be used in the face of so much achieved, leads on to a fundamental question of Canadian historiography. How is any central thesis of historical interpretation in Canadian history to be reconciled with the need to develop regional and provincial history if Canadian history is really to be understood?

The latest attempt at such an interpretation in Canadian historiography is the metropolitan thesis. As developed by J.M.S. Careless, the thesis is a restatement of the Laurentian theme.¹⁰ Is it, however, an endorsement of the Laurentian in that it is 'centralist'? Evidently not, for the centre is removed from Canada entirely and placed overseas in London. Moreover, as A.R.M. Lower pointed out long ago,¹¹ and as all Canadian history confirms, New York could claim as well as London to be the metropolis of Canada. And now David Macmillan points out that Glasgow too has claims.¹² Indeed, if the metropolitan centre is to be placed in Canada, to whom is that apple of discord to be awarded? There have been at least two claimants, Montreal and Toronto, since the awarding of the Charter of the Canadian Pacific Railway. In actual fact, Professor Careless himself is studying, in a much needed enterprise, the history of major Canadian cities. We may well have an account of limited metropolitan centres, and their influence at varying times in history. But while the metropolitan theme is an interesting street to explore, it does

8 A third result may be noted. Because Canadian history has been written as Laurentian history, the local and provincial history of Ontario and Quebec after 1867 have, until recently, been the least developed areas in that field.

9 French Canada is localized. Its sense of identity is based upon regional sentiment and interest, and made incandescent by cultural nationalism.

10 J.M.S. Careless, "Frontierism, Metropolitanism and Canadian History", *Canadian Historical Review*, XXV (1954), pp. 1-21.

11 The thought is recurrent in A.R.M. Lower's historical work, but perhaps its origin is to be found in his latest publication, *Great Britain's Woodyard* (Montreal, 1973), pp. 37-41.

12 David S. Macmillan, "The 'New Man' in Action: Scottish Mercantile and Shipping Operations in the North American Colonies, 1760-1825", in David S. Macmillan, ed., *Canadian Business History: Selected Studies, 1497-1791* (Toronto, 1972).

not point the way to an interpretation that would explain at once the centrality and the regionality of Canada's actual history. The metropolitan thesis seems necessarily to minimize the importance of the hinterland. Yet no metropolis lives of itself; it is to the extent that it is metropolitan, rather than just urban, a function of its hinterland. As does the Laurentian thesis, the metropolitan approach achieves coherence at the expense of complexity and needs the corrective of regional (hinterland) studies. The fundamental dilemma of Canada and its history is that Canada possesses but does not enjoy unity, and exists as a unity only by the manifold compromises and flexibilities of a state formally federal and organically dual and regional. Any unity can only be the result of a complex equation balancing unity and diversity, oneness and complexity, coherence and plurality. This is why nationalism is so difficult a term to define in the Canadian context; Canada in fact requires its own terminology.

There is, however, one factor which might help to explain the unity of the Canadian experience. No Canadian historian known to the writer as yet felt in his bones and brought out fully in his writings, the brute fact of distance in Canadian history, distance in space and distance in time. Harold Innis came closest, but he only indirectly and occasionally saw distance as the fundamental fact of Canadian history and Canadian life.¹³ No Canadian has analyzed the factor of distance as Geoffrey Blainey has done in his *The Tyranny of Distance* for Australian history.¹⁴ Yet it is distance, the mile on mile of distance, the scores of years of time of settlement, that explain at once the tenuous coherence of national bonds and the exceptional importance of the region in Canadian history. Canadians live concentrated in regions separated by vast distances of space but also long distances of time. Cape Breton, or Trois Rivières are separated from Owen Sound or Squamish not only by geographical space, but also by historical time. Distance explains more. It explains the preoccupation with communication in Canadian thought, history and daily life. It was no doubt accidental that A.G. Bell first tested his invention, the telephone, at Brantford, Ontario, but the peculiar Canadian affliction of being 'bushed', that is, unable to communicate, is not. To Canadians communication is not only an idea; it is also a deeply felt need, a passion, a philosophy of life, expressed in the writings of Harold Innis, Samuel Hayakawa, Marshall McLuhan, and in his own sensitive way, in those of Northrop Frye.¹⁵ It is too much to see in E.J. Pratt, in *The Catch-*

13 H.A. Innis, "Minerva's Owl", *Proceedings and Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, 1947, pp. 83-108.

14 Geoffrey Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance, How Distance Shaped Australia* (Melbourne, 1966).

15 See Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden* (Toronto, 1971); S.I. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action* (3rd ed., New York, 1972); H.A. Innis, *The Bias of Communication* (Toronto, 1951); Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto, 1962) and *The Medium is the Message* (Toronto, 1967).

alot at least, the poet of the incommunicable? Indeed, only in the Canadian experience does the root meaning of the word communicate resurface: to communion, to sup together, to share in one another's being. But there can be no full coherence in Canadian history without a fuller knowledge than we have a regional history. To communicate there must be something to communicate as well as a will to communicate.

If the reviewer, once thought a regionalist and now dubbed a centralist, may speak personally, I believe my own practice attempts and has always attempted the synthesis of local and general history. I think I have written no local history without explicit larger context. That belief made it natural for me to move from local to general subjects. Emotionally I was aided, I must confess, by the adoption of the policy of equalization grants as national policy in 1947. That decision seemed to me to recognize that a national policy which favoured the central regions at the expense of the outlying, was not national but in its own way local.

One must note that regionalism is a state of mind, founded on geographical location and set in historical experience. The study of regionalism is therefore as defensible in its own right as the study of national, or even world history. Naturally, it is prone to the common vices of history, parochialism, xenophobia, environmentalism,¹⁶ but regional history has its place, a place long neglected by professional historians, and the present cultivation of such history is to be welcomed and is highly rewarding. Indeed, the only satisfactory approach to Canadian history seems to the reviewer to be one that balances the regional and the central, the river, the prairies and the mountains, the metropolis and the hinterland. Such a balance can be struck only with the multiplication and improvement of regional history, but regional history of itself can only augment the evils of national history if it is not written to serve a larger context, the context of the nation and the world.

W. L. MORTON

16 The writer suffered from the latter in his first work when he returned from the green fields of England to the drought stricken West in 1935. Yet he still wonders how any one who saw people driven from their farms by drought and debt could have failed to believe that environment could not be a determining element in men's lives.