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National Policies and Persons of Various Kinds

IT IS DAUNTING to be confronted as a reviewer (and a non-Canadian reviewer at that) by a solid four inches of densely packed, double-columned scholarship detailing the careers of nearly 600 figures of significance to Canadian history who died in the decade of the 1890s. Moreover, the 450 contributors are front-ranking academics in various disciplines or unrivalled experts in the lives of the figures whose careers they have been asked to narrate (and often both). Yet reading the pages of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Volume XII* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1990) was a pleasurable experience, a chance to renew acquaintance with old 19th-century friends with whom I had partially lost touch and be reminded of the times we had gone through together. And while being reminded of old times, as if with the greater wisdom which comes from hindsight, I was introduced to new relations, friends and contemporaries and confronted with new insights into the lives of those I thought I knew well. While in past I have criticized the work of political scientists and sociologists who have treated the *DCB* as a source of raw data and delved no deeper into the primary material, it is easy to see the seductiveness of the wealth of knowledge and information contained in even a single volume.

Reading the biographies of nearly 600 Canadians could never be unrelievedly dull in any case. This volume, like the others, is studded with the unusual and the amusing. Some owe their presence to this: for example Charles Blondin, the tightrope walker, who not content with traversing the Niagara gorge below the Canadian falls, did so "at night, on stilts, with a sack over his head, did back somersaults on the rope, struggled in chains, and cooked a meal over the gorge on a large iron stove", although not, one assumes, all at once. Others have a more sober claim to inclusion, but stand out for different reasons. Take the case of the Rev. Angus Jonas McLeod, the Presbyterian minister who died from a fatal attack of hiccups; or Henry Wentworth Monk, Ontario farmer and social reformer, whose regular cure for a headache was to immerse his head in buckets of ice cold water; or even the ill-fated British Columbia premier John Robson, who on a visit to London crushed the tip of his little finger in the door of a hansom cab and was dead from blood poisoning nine days later. But perhaps most of all, consider the fate of William Weld, farmer and farming booster, who fell through a skylight in his attic, got his head lodged in the water reservoir which served his bathroom and unable to extricate himself, drowned.

If nothing else, the *DCB* demonstrates that the history of Canada mirrors that of all other nations in being a history of individual triumph and tragedy, of inspiring achievement and of hopes unfulfilled. It can also tell us much more about the specific nature of the Canadian historical experience. In this, however, it must be treated with caution. The process which led to the selection of the individuals treated in each volume is not such as to lend itself to statistical analysis. The assessment of prominence and historical significance would itself be subjective enough, but the editors have also rightly attempted to ensure a representation of minorities which might otherwise have been all but excluded by 19th-century value-systems. The fact

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that we are presented with a death cohort, rather than a birth cohort, also provides diversity at the expense of some sense of a common generation.

The pattern of deaths in this cohort is nevertheless suggestive of the rapid steps Canada had made away from being a colonial society by the end of the century. For the decade of the 1880s, covered by *Volume XI* (1982), nearly 10 per cent of the 586 subjects died in Britain. By the 1890s the figure was down to 6 per cent; and excluding the imperial officials, until 1867 by definition outsiders, the proportion would be even less. There were still those in Canadian society, such as Sir Roderick W. Cameron, who although born in Upper Canada, sent their sons to Harrow and retired to England to die; but by now they were merely the dying echo of a frame of mind left behind.

This is not to say that British-Canadians were yet at the stage of renouncing their British identity. Truro's Adams George Archibald continued to identify implicitly with Great Britain the moral principles upon which he saw society as resting. Irish-Canadians such as Timothy Warren Anglin embraced the imperial link as a central safeguard to Canadian identity. French Canadians were more ambivalent about their identity; but those such as Honoré Mercier who sought an immediate rupture of the links with Britain were balanced by those such as J.C. Taché who were prepared to work through Confederation and the empire towards gradual independence. Hence this imperial identity was being steadily placed in the context of a new sense of nationhood.

It is only fitting that a volume whose centrepiece is J.K. Johnson and P.B. Waite's article on John A. Macdonald should contain so many resonances of the process of nation-building. Much light is shed on the political paths to Confederation and the creation of national politics in the examinations of the careers of Macdonald (where the stress is on the stymied system of Upper/Lower Canadian politics and relations with America complicated by the Civil War), as well as in those of Alexander Galt and Leonard Tilley. Despite the role the provinces played in creating a focus for the resistance to nationalizing and centralizing tendencies which eventually scuppered Sir John's hopes of an evolving unitary constitution, the collective biography of *Volume XII* leaves no doubt as to the social impact of the Dominion government, and in particular of the migration to Ottawa and the creation of a new national community within the political elite. This volume is particularly informative for this process because it juxtaposes the careers of pre-Confederation politicians (Galt can be counted largely as such) and post-Confederation politicians (pre-eminently J.S.D. Thompson) with those, such as Tilley and Macdonald, whose careers effectively straddled Confederation.

There is also much on the parallel processes of economic nation-building. The career of David Lewis Macpherson exemplifies those of many Canadians who, in Ken Cruikshank's words, "preferred to set aside theoretical principles and questions of religion and nationality in a quest to develop the credit, capital, and resources of a developing nation" (p. 689). The centrality of the railway in this process is acknowledged by the presentation, as in previous volumes, of considerable detail of the process of railway-building and promotion: the extent to which railways provided the bridge between economics and politics for many nation-builders is again made abundantly clear. So too is the role of the economic threat of America in the

development of the National Policy after 1867: it is apparent in the career of Donald McInnes and his relations with John A. Macdonald, which revolved around McInnes' sustained pressure for protection from American imports. It is also apparent in the way in which the resulting National Policy created the environment which, in the hands of skilled and determined entrepreneurs such as H.A. Massey, provided the basis for progress towards a nationally integrated economy which could compete with America.

Yet it may well be that the real interest of the volume lies not in the light it sheds on these already well-trodden paths, but in the illumination it gives to the wider cultural and intellectual processes which, even more so than railways and federal politics, comprised the essence of nation-building. There is considerable evidence, for example, of the efforts of a small, but growing band of pioneers attempting to establish a distinctively Canadian literature. Biographies of W.W. Copp and John Lovell testify to the attempts to create a Canadian publishing industry — and a Canadian literature for it to publish — from the mundane but necessary production of Canadian school books and almanacs, through the publication of the works of leading writers and thinkers, to the self-conscious encouragement of the creation of a national history (John Lesperance), national poetry (John Collins) and national science (A.R. Gordon). The career of Joseph-Charles Taché demonstrates that this was a movement which crossed language boundaries, and this reduces any sense of irony that it was Calixa Lavallée, a French Canadian (though with Scotch blood), who wrote, as we are reminded here, "O Canada".

The growing sense of nationhood is very visible elsewhere. In art, figures such as Lucius O'Brien took it upon themselves to reflect the majestic natural beauty of a new nation, their widening travels (aided once again by the growing railway network) demonstrating a new sense of unity. Similarly, the photographers employed by William Notman travelled across Canada collecting "views of the nation" and creating a distinctively Canadian photography in the process; meanwhile Notman himself attracted to his Montreal studio "almost all the notables of Canada, French- and English-speaking" (p. 788). From the early 1860s through to the 1890s Thomas Fuller provided the paradigm and much of the specific design for "the more colourful and natural architectural image distinctive to Canada" which marked federal architecture by the end of the century (p. 345). In sport W.G. Beers provided Canada with another of the essential trappings of nationhood, a national game, albeit the game was lacrosse not ice-hockey.

Beers was not content merely to publicize lacrosse; he also founded the National Lacrosse Association and thus participated in the substantial institutionalization of national life which took place in the decades after Confederation and is reflected in this volume. Essentially regional or provincial associations such as the Institut Canadien had been established well before 1867; but in the years after, these were supplemented by an increasing number of overtly national associations, including the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts (1880) (G.T. Berthon), the Dominion Women's Christian Temperance Union (1883) (Letitia Creighton [Youmans]), and the National Council of Women of Canada (William J. Ritchie). And at the apex of all this, the formation of the Royal Society of Canada in 1882 is reflected in the presence of 13 founding members in this volume.

Where do the figures from Atlantic Canada fit into this process? On the surface it might appear that despite the depth of suspicion of the political process of nation-building, Atlantic Canadians were at the forefront of the development of a new cultural identity. Thomas B. Akins emerges not only as one of the band of early Canadian historians (in which he is joined by J.W. Lawrence), but also as the pioneer of Canadian archival conservation. J. Hunter Duvar, A.C. Jennings and Rebecca Armour all contributed to early Canadian literature, and the much more significant contribution of the region to post-Confederation literature, particularly the Confederation poets, is acknowledged in the account of the career of Joseph Collins, which also notes his own less distinguished contribution to Canadian literature and history. Contributions to Canadian publishing can also be seen in the careers of J.E.P. Hopper and G.E. Fenety. The careers of I.E. Bill, George Munro and T.H. Rand bear witness to the work of Maritimers in the development of higher education in the new Dominion. And perhaps most significantly, several men of science, towered over by J.W. Dawson, but also including Francis Bain and George Lawson contributed to the scientific aspect of nation-building which has been described recently by Suzanne Zeller.[1]

Yet it is noticeable that the weightier contributions were made by those who moved away from the Maritimes in the course of their careers, and often only once this move had occurred. For those whose world remained confined to the region, the sense of localism and regionalism predominated. There is much information here about the cultural development of the Atlantic region, but the participants, such as Samuel Creelman, W.F. Bunting or David Fitzgerald, with their literary societies, young men's Christian associations, historical societies and temperance associations, seemed to work within a regional, rather than a national, institutional framework. They shared in what was becoming a common national culture, largely because they shared in the extensive process of cultural borrowing from Britain, but those individuals were largely by-passed in the process of national institutionalization.

Moreover, the extent to which the *DCB* reflects the cultural vitality of the Atlantic region could be misleading. Emerging from this volume, one cannot help harbouring the uneasy feeling that cultural achievements are given an undue weighting for the region because of the paucity of claimants for inclusion with more solid material achievements. The tale of economic development which emerges is certainly uninspiring. The timber-shipbuilding-mercantile complex is represented by nearly 20 biographies, but of any conscious thrust towards broader economic development there is little sign, the National Policy notwithstanding. There are a few figures, including T.W. Daniel and James Murchie in New Brunswick, James Goodfellow and Moses Monroe in Newfoundland and William Moir in Nova Scotia, who were prepared to seize the opportunities available to expand existing manufacturing enterprises, or to invest wealth from the mercantile economy into manufacturing, but they appear as a small minority.

Instead the story is of poorly managed business interests (Peter Mitchell), successful firms which are apparently never expanded to their true potential (J.W.

1 Suzanne Zeller, *Inventing Canada: Early Victorian Science and the Idea of a Transcontinental Nation* (Toronto, 1987).

Moore), wealthy business leaders who eschew opportunities for industrial advance in favour of investments in land and securities, and in the case of Oliver Jones, of a lucrative business as a loan shark. As a result, innovations developed in the region, including Charles Fenety's development of a paper-making process from wood pulp, were left to others to develop. Often the steps towards manufacturing diversification are hesitant and faltering (Edward Kenny), and kept clearly secondary to established interests (Murchie). In part, this was a reflection on the more restricted local markets available; there is more than irony that the one figure who is praised for his "entrepreneurial drive and tenacity" (p. 748), the Halifax baker William Moir, expanded too fast and was forced to suspend in 1881. Nevertheless, the firm was able to survive and remain "one of the few Maritime industries able to withstand the pressures that increasingly brought the economy of the region under the control of central Canadian capital".

There is a certain irony in this. This is so partly because the economic policy which promoted this centralization of the Canadian economy (as well as the structure of Confederation which made it possible) was very much the responsibility of a New Brunswicker, Samuel Leonard Tilley, who himself sold a prosperous druggist's business to concentrate his energies on politics. Not only was Tilley instrumental in bringing New Brunswick into Confederation, but he was also, according to C.M. Wallace, "the architect of the national policy" (p. 1058) and continued to his death to be strong proponent of Canadian nationalism within the umbrella of the British empire. It is also so partly because when the generation of Macdonald and Tilley faded, their mantle was taken up, however briefly, by the most prominent of Halifax's sons, J.S.D. Thompson, "a nationalist, and a passionate one" (p. 1046). While Thompson was prepared to modify the National Policy, he continued to further the establishment of the Canadian state on other fronts, smoothing relations with the United States while standing up for what he saw as the Dominion's legitimate demands, guiding through the 1892 Canadian Criminal Code, and then struggling with the Manitoba Schools question.

Mention of the Manitoba Schools throws into relief the optimism of the preceding discussions of nation-building, an optimism which could appear naive in view of contemporary developments. Thompson first came to national prominence for his speech defending the execution of Riel after the North-West Rebellion in 1885, and although Riel's own biography appeared in *Volume XI*, there are plenty of echoes here (only Macdonald has a clearly larger number of cross-references). Thompson's difficulties with Manitoba also reflected a persistent theme of biographies which are too numerous to mention, namely conflict over the education system and the heightened ethnic and religious tensions which resulted. His first speech as Prime Minister, reaffirming his commitment to the Dominion of Canada, serves as a reminder that he faced a minority, but a vocal minority, of the Liberal Party, who looked to absorption within the United States. His subsequent problems with D'Alton McCarthy likewise remind us that the violence and intolerance of the nationalism of some could threaten the very roots of nationhood.

As an Englishman, it might be beyond my brief to offer any direct criticisms of

the *DCB*,[2] especially as historians of Britain are completely lacking a parallel resource, a gap they are only now making very tardy moves towards filling. Nevertheless it is perhaps fair to say that despite the prominence given to the central debates and conflicts of nation-building in the decades after 1867, this volume, perhaps more so than its predecessor, gives an unduly optimistic view of nation-building. As substantial involvement in federal politics was mostly (although not exclusively) the purview of the pro-Confederationists, and the criteria of importance for the *DCB* are weighted heavily in favour of this political milieu, anti-Confederate sentiment is perhaps under-emphasized. As a result the tensions of Canadian identity in the post-1867 period are presented within a framework which portrays them as hurdles which are to be overcome, rather than as fissures which are only being papered over. Although there are wide variations in individual cases, anti-Confederates do not receive the same weight of treatment here as pro-Confederates.

Although unfortunate, this is perhaps inevitable given the extent to which the selection and treatment of individuals is skewed towards politicians and administrators. Commenting on the school histories of Henry Hopper Miles, Nancy Christie notes that "[a]lthough largely political and military in nature, Miles' histories did not entirely neglect cultural, social and economic developments" (p. 737). This rather backhanded compliment might almost stand application to the *DCB* itself. Of course, to end on this note would be churlish; this volume is a magnificent achievement in its own right and worthily takes its place in the series which scholars on this side of the Atlantic can only regard with envy.

MARTIN HEWITT

2 Although you will perhaps understand my noticing that on p. 430 E.O. Hewett is named as "Hewitt" in the notes to his entry.