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Reflections on Recent Auto/Biographies of Canadian Historians

BIOGRAPHIES TAKE TIME TO RESEARCH AND WRITE, as do any other works of history. They also reflect their author's values and priorities as well as the moments of time and other circumstances surrounding their creation. This is true, to varying degrees, of the auto/biographies of historians in Canada and elsewhere, and this essay reviews four such works by or about historians connected with Atlantic Canada: Hugh Gault's *The Quirky Dr Fay: A Remarkable Life* (Cambridge: Gretton Books, 2011); Helen Forsey's *Eugene Forsey: Canada's Maverick Sage* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2012); Michael Bliss's *Writing History: A Professor's Life* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2011); and E.R. Forbes's *The Education of an Innocent: An Autobiography of E.R. "Ernie" Forbes* (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 2012).

The various books concerning the life and work of the University of Toronto historian Harold Adams Innis (1894-1952) are good examples of how authors and other circumstances shape to a large degree the resultant auto/biographies. His first biographer, Donald Creighton (1902-1979), was a dear friend and close colleague, who wrote *Harold Adams Innis: Portrait of a Scholar* "under a fresh, deep sense of personal bereavement" over the summer of 1956.[1] The irascible Creighton wrote not only under pressure of time but against the distraction of prior writing commitments. He was additionally burdened by the bruising effects of the departmental and university politics that he largely brought upon himself by virtue of his lack of tact and political guile. It is a wonder that he got past the first paragraph. As befitted the conventions of the time, Creighton did not delve too deeply into Innis's private life, although his text was informed by personal knowledge and access to personal papers. The occasion also played a role. Written as an official commemoration of Innis, the book is laudatory in tone and discreet in content.[2] It is also beautifully expressed and profoundly moving in places. In the words of Don Wright, Creighton's biographer, it is permeated by "warmth and affection."[3]

Two further studies of Innis, though, make no pretence to be biographies, or at best are austere and unrelenting intellectual biographies; it is no accident that most discussion of Innis's work exists in article form. Economist Robin Neill's *A New Theory of Value: The Canadian Economics of Harold Adams Innis* is a critique of Innis's use of staples theory.[4] But Innis turned from staples economist to

1 Donald Creighton, *Harold Adams Innis: Portrait of a Scholar* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957; repr. 1987).

2 See also a later commemorative publication – E.A. Havelock, *Harold A. Innis: A Memoir* (Toronto: Harold Innis Foundation, 1982).

3 I am most grateful to Don Wright for sending me the relevant chapter of his forthcoming biography of Donald Creighton. For an interim report, see Donald Wright, "Reflections on Donald Creighton and the Appeal of Biography," *Journal of Historical Biography* 1 (2007): 15-26, http://www.ufv.ca/jhb/Volume_1/Volume_1_Wright.pdf.

4 See Robin Neill, *A New Theory of Value: The Canadian Economics of Harold Adams Innis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972).

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communications theorist, and Paul Heyer's *Harold Innis* deals with Innis's latter phase in the "Key Thinkers in Critical Media Studies" series.[5] Creighton, Neill, and Heyer wrote quite divergent accounts of Innis from the perspective of their disciplinary backgrounds and with different audiences in mind.

By contrast, Alexander John Watson's "life and work" biography of Innis – *Marginal Man: The Dark Vision of Harold Innis* – takes a more rounded and enlarged approach (at more than five times of the word length of Creighton's modest memoir).[6] In keeping with the expansive biographies of historians that have become commonplace over the past 20 years, *Marginal Man* is deeply researched. A dense and difficult book, it reads as though written in fits and starts as other commitments allowed. Although primarily an intellectual biography, *Marginal Man* is also more intrusive than the typical biography of the 1950s. Uninhibited by the restraints of friendship or what family might think, Watson takes a more dispassionate approach and discusses the personal aspects of Innis's life. Whereas, for example, Creighton glosses over Innis's poor parenting, Watson is more explicit and rightly so: there is no point in having children if they are barely part of your life. As the subtitle indicates, Watson looks at the darker side, and not simply Innis's dark and pessimistic moral vision. He confronts head-on Innis's insecurities, his sensitivity to criticism (especially the reception of his even-more-impenetrable communications research), the psychological effects of service in the First World War, his depressive episodes, and the resulting strain on his wife.

In short, biographies of historians depend not simply on the subject and the archive but will be shaped vicariously by the wider conventions of time and place and by authorial priority and idiosyncrasy.[7] The occasion and the purpose for writing both count, but not as much as authorial competence and insight. Not surprisingly, these and other issues are also evident in recent autobiographies and biographies about or by historians with Atlantic Canadian connections.

The first of these is Hugh Gault's *The Quirky Dr Fay: A Remarkable Life*, which is a rescue mission on behalf of an almost-forgotten English historian. In his day, C.R. Fay (1884-1961) was a fairly considerable and prolifically published figure in the historical profession. Trained in history and economics at Cambridge before writing his DSc thesis on the co-operative movement at the London School of Economics, Fay is far better remembered among economists. This provides another reminder that the dismal scientists are in one sense more historically minded than historians in paying more attention to their ancestors and the history of their discipline. Most of Fay's career was spent at Cambridge, but during the 1920s he was Innis's colleague as a professor of economic history within the Department of Political Economy at Toronto. For someone whom Gault describes as being "a man who could make things happen" (132), Fay remains a shadowy figure in Canadian historiography. He is barely mentioned in the various histories of the Canadian

5 See Paul Heyer, *Harold Innis* (Lantham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

6 Alexander John Watson, *Marginal Man: The Dark Vision of Harold Innis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

7 See Doug Munro, "Biographies of Historians – or, The Cliographer's Craft," *Australian Historical Studies* 43, no. 1 (March 2012): 11-27.

historical profession, and then only in passing.[8] One might have expected a higher profile: although Fay built his career outside of Canada, he certainly took an interest in the country's economic history at a time when Canadian historical writing was in its infancy.

Gault does not directly address why Fay had seemingly so little impact during his time in Toronto, but the answers emerge nevertheless from a reading of his book. Quite simply, Fay had not disentangled himself from his previous interests. This is not to say that he ignored Canadian history, only that he never really got into it – not surprisingly since he usually spent three months of each year in England (128). He did make research trips around Canada, took a close interest in the relationship between Britain and Canada, and co-authored (with Harold Innis) a chapter on the economic development of the Maritime Provinces for the *Cambridge History of the British Empire* (1930). But he wrote no major work on Canadian economic history during the 1920s. As a result, it matters little that Gault does not engage with the preoccupations and debates in Canadian historiography during that decade.

Returning to Cambridge, Fay continued his work on English and British Empire history. Although he supported such notable causes as women's rights and equal educational opportunity, Fay was not an easy person with whom to get along due mainly to the shell shock he suffered during the First World War. Following the death of his long-suffering wife in 1951, Fay went to live with his son in Belfast. From this "base camp" (v, 170), he travelled to Newfoundland and Labrador for a month-long research trip in 1952. This excursion resulted the following year in an invitation by Memorial University to deliver a series of lectures (published three years later as *Life and Labour in Newfoundland*). Gault was prevented from consulting the relevant archival material because the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland was shut while changing premises for much of the time he was researching Fay. The cursory treatment of the Newfoundland excursion (175-6) does affect the thoroughness of Gault's enquiry, but readers can turn to an article by Peter Ludlow for detailed coverage of the background and ramifications of his activities in Newfoundland and Labrador.[9] Briefly, Fay's lectures were permeated with anti-Catholic and anti-Irish sentiments – sentiments that caused considerable offence with his sponsors in Newfoundland. More positively, Fay assumed the role of public intellectual and urged Newfoundlanders to preserve their historical records and to write their own history. In appointing Fay to deliver the lecture series, Memorial sought both to enhance its scholarly reputation and foster an interest in Newfoundland history. In this way Fay became a state-sponsored scholar in the new Canadian province. His advocacy gave needed impetus to the ongoing preservation and proper management of historical records that continues to this day in the province.

Despite Fay's lapse in scholarly even-handedness in his Newfoundland lectures, one can only agree with Gault that "his life was eventful, fast-paced, at times heroic and one lived to the full. Not all his writing was high quality, but the best was exciting, enjoyable and insightful" (185). A case in point is his idiosyncratic "life

8 See, for example, Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing Since 1900*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 90, 92.

9 Peter Ludlow, "Searching for the Past, Writing for the Present: Charles Ryle Fay and Newfoundland's Contested Past," *Acadiensis* XXXIX, no. 2 (Summer/Autumn 2010): 89-108.

and times" biography of the English politician William Huskisson (1770-1830), who had the doubtful distinction of being the world's first locomotive fatality.[10] The quality of Fay's writing deteriorated in the late 1950s, but his review of Creighton's biography of Harold Innis in the *Economic Journal*, although written late in life when his mental health problems were intensifying, shows that a flickering candle can still muster the inspiration to cast light.[11]

Whereas Fay came to Newfoundland late in life and finished his professional career with the booklet-length *Channel Islands and Newfoundland* (1961), Eugene Forsey's trajectory was the reverse. Born in Newfoundland, Forsey (1904-1991) made his reputation elsewhere although he never lost affection for the place of his upbringing. He was variously Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University, lecturer at McGill University, Senator, constitutional expert and author of *The Royal Power of Dissolution of Parliament in the British Commonwealth*, labour movement stalwart and author of *Trade Unions in Canada, 1812-1902*, civil liberties watchdog, Christian activist, and public intellectual.[12] Far from embracing his politically conservative background, he converted to social democracy and repeatedly thrust himself on the public's attention. Unlike Fay, who has largely dropped beneath the horizon, Forsey's place in the public memory is likely to continue with the recent appearance of an affectionate biography by his daughter – Helen Forsey's *Eugene Forsey: Canada's Maverick Sage*.

One would like to approach Helen Forsey's biography solely on its merits, but that is easier said than done. One difficulty is the presence of a previous biography – Frank Milligan's *Eugene A. Forsey: An Intellectual Biography* – that Helen Forsey claims is laden with misunderstandings and misrepresentations (257-8).[13] She is very protective of her father's legacy. To complicate any evaluation of Eugene Forsey's life, it is sometimes difficult to know what to make of the self-appraisals in his autobiography. He states, for example, "I have always jibbed at being called a 'constitutional expert,' the more so because the fact is that while I know a great deal about very few rather obscure and minor points of Canadian constitutional law and practice – a good amount about some others, a fair amount about still others, a little about a few more – I know absolutely nothing about a very large part of the topic."[14] Despite such false modesty, Forsey was very self-assured when he made pronouncements on constitutional matters.

Filial biographies need not be hagiographic or purblind, and they are sometimes anything but. Margaret Cole (1893-1980) was nothing if not frank about her husband and fellow-historian, G.D.H. Cole (1889-1959), with whose writings Forsey became familiar at Oxford.[15] Yet Helen Forsey has a lot to be affectionate about because her

10 C.R. Fay, *Huskisson and his Age* (London: Longmans, Green, 1951).

11 Fay, *Economic Journal* 68, no. 272 (December 1958): 822-4.

12 See Eugene Forsey, *The Royal Power of Dissolution of Parliament in the British Commonwealth* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1943), and Forsey, *Trade Unions in Canada, 1812-1902* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982).

13 Frank Milligan, *Eugene A. Forsey: An Intellectual Biography* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004). See also Helen Forsey, "Eugene Forsey: Reluctant Intellectual," *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'études canadiennes* 41, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 218-25.

14 Eugene Forsey, *A Life on the Fringe* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990), 117.

15 See Margaret Cole, *The Life of G.D.H. Cole* (London: Macmillan, 1971).

father had "a strong domestic streak" (149) and was a committed parent in ways that Innis was not. She is not altogether uncritical – pointing out, for example, that some of her father's attitudes were sexist (190-5) and that her mother was "fettered . . . by the sexist expectations that were laid on the wives and mothers of that era" (154), not to mention that his concern with social justice did not extend toward gays and lesbians (194). She also concedes that the same person who "tried to find gentle ways of reminding his activist daughter to keep a sense of proportion in her militancy" (201) could himself be unnecessarily cutting and sarcastic in the heat of battle (183). All the same, the pervading tone verges on veneration. She insists that her text is "not a biography" at all but "a different kind of book – a portable package of his gifts, a kit filled with the tools that he left us" (432-3).

Helen Forsey's narrative is chronologically structured but in a broadly thematic way, which is useful to the overriding purpose to *explain* her father: "There are many [who] know of him only as a former senator, an ardent monarchist and federalist, and as a fastidious critic on obscure points of the Constitution. To them my portrait of him as a committed progressive may come as a surprise. But in fact, he was all of those things" (434).[16] Helen Forsey also stresses that a "key factor [in her father's] deciding whether or not to engage was the fit between a given issue and his own fields of expertise" (198). The picture to emerge is of a man of the left, and of principle, who followed his conscience whatever the cost to himself.

What is difficult to accept is the description of Forsey as a "reluctant" protagonist. Rather, Forsey quite deliberately pushed himself to the forefront of battle, at least on those issues closest to his heart, and it cost him his job at McGill University in 1941. Helen Forsey depicts this as a clear-cut case of her father being victimized for "his independence of thought, his insistence on speaking his mind, and his principled refusal to comply with what he considered outrageous directives on political and academic matters" (239-41, 393-4). Eugene Forsey certainly had a point in complaining that his public activities were subject to "arbitrary and ill-defined limits."[17] Helen Forsey presses into service Michiel Horn, and one can only agree with Horn that Forsey's "left-wing opinions *were* the principal cause of his involuntary departure" from McGill.[18] But Horn also indicates, as Helen Forsey does not, that McGill had some regard for due process; otherwise, her father would have been dismissed at least eight years earlier.[19] Also lacking in Helen Forsey's account is the recognition that McGill had valid concerns about one of its academics being diverted from his calling. It is left to the berated Frank Milligan to identify "the potential conflict between scholarly work and public activism. In this regard Forsey . . . put himself in a most tenuous situation, for he was devoting a tremendous amount of time to his public interests, and this necessarily delayed the completion

16 I doubt that they would have been surprised, though, as his role in the League for Social Reconstruction and at *Canadian Forum* is well documented.

17 See Milligan, *Eugene Forsey*, 152.

18 Michiel Horn, *Academic Freedom in Canada: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 128-44 (emphasis in original). See also Peter C. Kent "The Unrealized Potential of Canada's Universities," *Acadiensis* XXXI, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 207-14.

19 Michiel Horn, "Academic Freedom," *History of Academic Culture* 4, no. 4 (2004), http://www.ucalgary.ca/hic/issues/vol4/6.

of his scholarly obligations, such as the submission of his doctoral dissertation and his participation in related original research."[20] The irony is that Forsey was sacked not long after his much-delayed doctoral dissertation was submitted.

Several wider points emerge from a discussion of Forsey's dismissal. One concerns the social responsibility to contribute to informed public debate, and academics are berated from time to time for failure to do so effectively or for their lack of doing so at all. Those who do enter the public arena, however, are likely to be targeted, especially in fraught times (such as during the Cold War), and to be harassed and have their integrity and competence called into question. At the same time, the academy has always been ambivalent about its members sometimes having dual citizenship in the worlds of learning and activism. Then there is the widespread feeling within the academy that political activity is inconsistent, or at least potentially so, with the status of being a disinterested scholar, and the complaint that "public professors" are apt to neglect the academic duties for which they are paid. Forsey is not alone in making clear the impossibility of combining teaching and research with a heavy and continuing involvement in public activism. One can do justice to two of these activities, but not all three: one of them will always come up short. Examples readily come to mind. Forsey's near-contemporary Frank Underhill (1889-1971), for instance, who was almost sacked by the University of Toronto (also in 1941), was a determined activist and a highly regarded teacher; but there were not enough hours in the day to ever write a major book.[21]

A comparison with New Zealander J.C. Beaglehole (1901-1971) is instructive. Beaglehole was only able to undertake the enormous task of editing Captain Cook's journals for the Hakluyt Society, and to engage in public affairs to the extent he did, because he was largely relieved of his teaching obligations. Moreover, he and Forsey had experienced the termination of a university position; both were concerned with social justice and civil liberties, an unpopular cause at the best of times; both had a strain of indignation when confronted with injustice; and each knew how to speak his mind (sometimes cuttingly). In another twist, both were initially regarded as crass dissidents and each went on to receive a measure of endorsement by the establishment.[22] The difference was that Beaglehole did not seek the limelight whereas Forsey played to the gallery. Helen Forsey does touch on her father's compulsion to get involved and is somewhat at a loss for an explanation (203). Perhaps there is no explanation beyond suggesting that one is compulsive because one *is* compulsive. Take, for example, Beaglehole and Forsey as writers of letters to newspaper editors. Over a 50-year period, Beaglehole wrote little more than 20 such letters, and they had an impact.[23] Forsey, by contrast, had more than 800 of his letters

20 Milligan, *Eugene Forsey*, 151.

21 R. Douglas Francis, *Frank Underhill: Intellectual Provocateur* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986). See also Kenneth C. Dewar, "F.H. Underhill and the Making of 'The Intellectual'," *History of Academic Culture* 8, no. 1 (Fall 2008/09), http://www.ucalgary.ca/hic/files/hic/Dewar.pdf.

22 See Tim Beaglehole, *A Life of J.C. Beaglehole: New Zealand Scholar* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2006).

23 See Doug Munro, *J.C. Beaglehole: Public Intellectual, Critical Conscience* (Wellington: Steele Roberts, 2012), 68.

to newspaper editors published, and after his death a cartoonist ran the caption "Dear [newspaper] Editors: You're on your own" (285). Forsey always wanted to get in the last word, and he had an attentive constituency. But his massive number of newspaper letters may have run the risk of an "overproduction of opinion," to use Stefan Collini's term,[24] and a consequent diminution of his cultural authority – although his pre-eminence as a constitutional expert may have offset that risk (at least to some degree). All the same, Forsey was not one to be deterred: as a colleague remarked, even when Forsey knew he could not win "he went off and fired his cannons anyway."[25] None of this is to deny Forsey's sincerity of purpose nor to doubt his courage under fire, or least of all to gainsay that he was a man of values; it is only to regret that a dutiful daughter has not transcended the pitfalls of filial biography.

By contrast, Michael Bliss's (b. 1941) *Writing History: A Professor's Life* is very forthright. Stroppy, censorious, and not prone to taking prisoners, neither is Bliss in the habit of mincing his words. There is also plenty of self-reflection, and he acknowledges that in his younger days he was "temperamentally inclined to be a good hater" (192). Only in his fifties did he start "losing some of the aggressive, competitive, occasionally mean-spirited edge that had driven [him] as an ambitious young professor" (303), and in retirement (after 36 years at the University of Toronto) he has "worked hard at becoming mellow and cuddly, and on most days sublimated the urge to write letters and columns attacking the wrongs of the world" (418). This is a book I initially viewed askance, but I am compelled to say that it would have to be among the most perceptive, incisive, and engaging of the 30 or so historians' memoirs that have appeared since Jeremy Popkin's seminal study of the genre – *History, Historians, & Autobiography*.[26] It is a marvellous book.

Typically of historians' biographies, *Writing History* (15-75) contains a wonderful evocation of childhood, adolescence, and upbringing.[27] Often, this is tinged with sadness. In Bliss's case it involved being part of a "flawed family." He speaks affectionately of his father, an overworked small-town general practitioner; less so of his shrewish mother who was professionally frustrated, obsessed with social mobility, and adept at withholding love and approval.[28] The best-kept secrets are often within families, and only later did Bliss learn from his older brother Jim the extent of their father's unhappiness in his vocation and, sometimes, in his marriage. Parental pressure pushed the highly intelligent Jim to overachievement,

24 See Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 389.

25 Kenneth McNaught, *Conscience and Memory: A Memoir* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 155-6.

26 Jeremy Popkin, *History, Historians, & Autobiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

27 See also, for example, Michael Howard, *Captain Professor: A Life in War and Peace* (London: Continuum, 2006), 11-37, and Patrick Collinson, *The History of a History Man: or, The Twentieth Century Viewed from a Safe Distance* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2011), 22-48.

28 Bliss is not the only historian to acknowledge having had a strained relationship with his mother. See also Michiel Horn, *Becoming Canadian: Memoirs of an Invisible Migrant* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 110, 293, as well as Philip Temple, *Chance is a Fine Thing: A Memoir* (Auckland: Viking, 2009).

with ultimately tragic results.[29] Bliss himself had the negative experience of being expected to emulate his brother's achievements. His mother, however, also pushed him into public speaking, which held him in good stead as both a university teacher and a public intellectual (43-5, 235).

Bliss had no ordinary childhood, if there is such a thing, and neither is the trajectory of his professional life in any way mundane or typical, although Bliss initially affects the posture that his life was "never particularly exciting or even colourful" (11-12). To the contrary, Bliss's life has been interesting and varied. He has written a dozen monographs and, in the process, switched from business history, via social history, to medical history and biographies of medical scientists. There is an element of incongruity that Bliss made a conscious decision not to become a medical practitioner after witnessing his father stitch up an injured drunk, but later turned his hand to medical history to such effect. His medical biographies have impacted on the wider circle of medical biographers. Peter McPhee, for example, has acknowledged the value of Bliss's biography of Sir Frederick Banting for his own biography of the Australian physiologist R.D. Wright (1907-1990), in suggesting how he (McPhee) might integrate Wright's political activism, professional career, and often-fraught personal life into "a more rounded biography."[30] Bliss has also had a stint at journalism and freelancing outside the academy. Frequently outspoken, he has been an ardent, uncloistered spirit in ways that some academics would not dream about.

Writing History adheres to the typical mould of historians' autobiographies only to the extent of being authored late-ish in life by a senior historian. In almost every other respect (apart from the evocation of childhood), it departs from the norm. As Jeremy Popkin has pointed out, most historians who write autobiographies feel an obligation to withhold information that would diminish the profession's public reputation. Accordingly, historians' memoirs typically lack "drama and tension"[31] – in contrast to campus novels, which bristle with intrigue and betrayal. Nothing could be further from the truth in the case of *Writing History*, which pointedly exposes the emperor's new clothes in an institutional setting. Prolifically published himself, Bliss has no patience with the non-producers who are protected by tenure. He is withering in his criticisms of those academics who do not or will not publish (257) and of the "subsidy mongering" of grant applicants who have "consumed tax dollars without significant results" (173-4). He also used the occasion of his award of an honorary doctorate by the University of Toronto to call for "the need for academics to temper their sense of entitlement with greater responsibility in accounting for research grants, the use of sabbaticals, and the granting of tenure" (418, 420). That is not entirely fair: there are historians, such as John Weaver of McMaster University (the most recent recipient of the François-Xavier Garneau Medal), who have produced an important book for every funded project.

As a public intellectual, Bliss has also been equally uncompromising in his opposition to the recognition of Quebec as a "nation" and the Meech Lake Accord

29 Jim died age 39 "probably . . . of a heart attack or stroke brought on by years of hypertension, but it was decided not to do an autopsy to avoid the possibility of finding suicide" (141).

30 See Peter McPhee, *"Pansy": A Life of Roy Douglas Wright* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1999), 7.

31 Popkin, *History, Historians, & Autobiography*, 154.

(among other things) – not to mention the "patronage and sleazy cronyism and blatant hypocrisy under both Liberals and Conservatives" (251). And although he deplored the student rebellions of the 1960s (143-7, 151-5), Bliss also admits to never having been a team player at the departmental level (though he undertook his teaching and supervision assiduously). On one tense occasion he took rightful objection to the university imposing an ethical review of grant applications (191-2). As Stuart Macintyre bluntly argues, the idiocies, iniquities, and inconsistencies of university ethics committees worldwide are largely a result of a hard sciences model being imposed on the process; and these bodies by "an unethical act of aggrandisement" have extended their purview to all other disciplines.[32]

A readiness to take issue must often have made Bliss an uncomfortable colleague in a department where he always considered himself "an outsider" (297). Nor did it help his frame of mind that he believed that his salary was well below the levels of other professors (219). The upshot was a "trial separation" from the University of Toronto while Bliss took on paid assignments in journalism, commissioned histories, and in popularizing history. Bliss goes into the financial specifics of some of his publishing ventures – details of the sort that seldom find their way into historians' autobiographies, but which remind one of A.J.P. Taylor's pecuniary successes on the open market[33] – and he admits that keeping financial records became an "obsession" (72n). Few historians are prepared to inject the grubbiness of commerce into their autobiographies to that extent. Bliss also speaks frankly about being a "media professor" (284-9), pointing out "the most important qualification for getting on the air often seemed just being available" as well as the need to avoid being "booked as a regular spokesman for any particular viewpoint." He likewise rationed the extent of his print journalism to no more than a bi-weekly basis – advice that Eugene Forsey could well have heeded. Freelancing, however, has its perils (such as having to adhere to rigid deadlines). Bliss did well enough, but he came to realize that "unless one was independently wealthy, or sold fabulously bestselling books, a senior professorship at Canada's best university was not to be sneezed at, not to be walked away from. I could rant about the featherbedding and hypocrisy of academic life, but deep down was probably a university professor to the core – content with teaching and long summer breaks so that I could write books that did not have to be aimed at low common denominators" (252-3).

Bliss's instinct was correct: freelancing is a strain and historians struggle to make a decent living from their writings alone, despite the occasional exception. Pierre Berton's (1920-2004) annual earnings reached $400,000 a year by the 1970s. One year he published no book but received $100,000 from royalties on previous books.[34] Other authors' earnings were miniscule by comparison, and little more than a supplement to an existing salary. C.P. Stacey's (1906-89) most successful book, commercially, was his biography of Mackenzie King, but his take was only $17,000 over six years.[35]

32 See Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars*, 2nd ed. (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2004), 47.

33 See Kathleen Burk, *Troublemaker: The Life of A.J.P. Taylor* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 416-19.

34 A.B. McKillop, *Pierre Berton: A Biography* (Toronto: Emblem, 2010), 570-1.

35 C.P. Stacey, *A Date with History: Memoirs of a Canadian Historian* (Ottawa: Deneau, 1982), 269.

Writing History transcends a particular limitation of the typical historian's autobiography. As Popkin has pointed out, historian-autobiographers are often deterred from writing about aspects of their professional life "by what they see as its repetitive and unstorylike character."[36] Teaching and committee work are two such under-represented areas. So too are the mechanics of research and the nitty-gritty of writing, and when historian-autobiographers do make the attempt to describe such activities the result is often half-baked.[37] A notable exception is J.H. Elliott's *History in the Making*, which is explicitly an exercise in historiographic/intellectual analysis and barely an autobiography at all.[38] Bliss, by contrast, has written a more rounded autobiography while at the same time doing justice to dynamics of research and writing. The section on the writing of the 1982 *The Discovery of Insulin* (185-215), which was his first foray into medical history, is an extraordinary tour de force.[39] It takes real skill to write so compellingly, and at length, about the mechanics of the creative process – and in a way that unravels the so-called mystery of it all. It is not simply a case of being an exponent of belles lettres, as Bliss half-jokingly says (216) with respect to J.K. Galbraith.[40] As in the case of Galbraith, it is also a matter of having something to say to begin with. All the same, if you do have something to say then it pays to say it well and to get it right; and Bliss admits to having "worked hard at trying to write well." There is no magic wand, but Bliss does give insight into his motivation and techniques in trying to make his prose "flow and sparkle." He wants his books "to be accessible to all intelligent readers," so he aims at "clarity and precision, with a few basic literary flourishes, allusions, and jokes" (12) – as when he half-jokes that writing a book on the ravages of smallpox was preferable to observing Canadian politics (293). At the same time, he realizes that he has no talent for creative writing (176) – although connoisseurs of blood sports and academic terrorism might regret that Bliss, unlike Galbraith, never wrote a campus novel, satirical or otherwise. In the case of *A Tenured Professor*,[41] Bliss would have warmed to the protagonist's entrepreneurial flair.

As a literary craftsman and stylist, Bliss is no one's clone. He is firm that Donald Creighton's writing style was a "direct influence" on a single, solitary occasion (244). Rather, he acknowledges the stimulus, in their different ways, of his high school English teacher, A.J.P. Taylor, Edward Gibbon, and "the novelists and poets who make me conscious of the uses of metaphor and simile" (170-1). It is difficult to put one's finger on the qualities that make the reader want to read the next sentence and to turn to the next page, but Bliss has achieved this hard-won ability. Be it at the level of choice of word, turn of phrase, or getting the transitions to the point where the prose is seamless, Bliss weaves a story containing the drama and suspense that Jeremy Popkin rarely discerned in earlier historian-memoirists.

36 Popkin, *History, Historians, & Autobiography*, 155.

37 See, for example, Asa Briggs, *Special Relationships: People and Places* (London: Frontline, 2012), 145-62.

38 J.H. Elliott, *History in the Making* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

39 Michael Bliss, *The Discovery of Insulin* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984).

40 See also John Kenneth Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times: Memoirs* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 535-7.

41 John Kenneth Galbraith, *A Tenured Professor* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990).

Historians' autobiographies written purely from memory are apt to contain embarrassing factual errors.[42] With customary forthrightness, Bliss is adamant that "nothing is invented or reimagined in these pages. I do not believe in the oxymoronic and now discredited genre of 'creative non-fiction.' I have tried to make this memoir as honest as I possibly can" (13). This recalls Edward Gibbon's assertion: "Truth, naked unblushing truth, the first virtue of more serious history, must be the sole recommendation of [my own] personal narrative."[43] Doubtless there are those who will question Bliss's take on particular episodes (or even his take on himself), but his factual accuracy is unlikely to be challenged. Like Bruce Mansfield in *Summer Is Almost Over*,[44] Bliss has made extensive use of his diaries (12, 72n). Diaries are neither neutral nor uncontrived, but a good deal of confidence can be placed in Bliss's diaries because his motives are straightforward in that the regularly kept diaries were "an outlet for frustrations, ambition, insecurities, and anger" (174). Frequently quoted in his book, and sometimes at length, the diaries record how a given issue was viewed *at the time* and thus provide a safeguard against memory being filtered through subsequent experience. The diary entries provide insights rather than hindsights.

To read Michael Bliss's autobiography is to engage with a fine mind. His memoir is particularly recommended to those dismissive of autobiography and sceptical that hard analysis can be embedded within an essentially descriptive text. He dispenses with the notion that one has to be solemn to be serious, or that one has to be obtuse in order to be to be profound. Not least, Bliss demonstrates that recounting the mechanics of research and writing – the very activities that absorb so much of an academic's energies but which autobiographers normally eschew – can be made intensely interesting in the hands of a skilled writer.

Michael Bliss came to Atlantic Canada later in life, having purchased a holiday home on Prince Edward Island. His previous experience of the region was limited to teaching a summer course at the University of New Brunswick in 1971, and he was less than impressed. In a remarkably Toronto-centric remark he states that "it said something about New Brunswickers' interests that only fifty students took my course in the history of Canada since Confederation, as opposed to about two hundred who registered for an utterly tedious course on the Maritimes from 1713 to 1848 . . ." (142). Ernie Forbes (b. 1940), on the other hand, is a Maritimer born and bred and is unabashed in his regional loyalties. In contrast to Bliss's 428 pages, Forbes's autobiography – *The Education of an Innocent: An Autobiography of E.R. "Ernie" Forbes* – is a modest 142 smaller-format pages, which are bookended by an excellent introduction by his former student Stephen Dutcher (1-7) and an edited

42 See, for example, W.H. Oliver, *Looking for the Phoenix: A Memoir* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2002).

43 Edward Gibbon, quoted in Popkin, *History, Historians, & Autobiography*, 98.

44 Bruce Mansfield, *Summer is Almost Over* (Canberra: Barton Books, 2012), 3. Mansfield, at Macquarie University, translated from being a historian of Australia to becoming the historian of Erasmus. Unlike Mansfield, Bliss never went into university administration despite occasionally being half-tempted (181, 189). And Mansfield, unlike Bliss, never became a public intellectual in the political sphere.

transcript of recorded conversations with *Acadiensis* co-editor John Reid to flesh out details of Forbes's professional life (113-33).[45]

The son of a peripatetic United Church minister, Forbes had a fairly tough upbringing. There was nothing in his grades as a student of Classics at Mount Allison University to suggest an academic historian in the offing, especially when he involved himself in the distraction of student politics. He also tried the officer cadet program of the Canadian army, but skydived into "deep shit" for his independence of mind (48-9). Upon graduation, and just married to Irene MacConnell, Ernie and his new bride both taught school, and they were probably less than surprised that the education courses at Mount Allison had no practical value in the classroom. It was then that Forbes decided to enrol in the master's program at Dalhousie University, in History rather than Classics, and Irene agreed to assume the role of PhT (Putting Hubby Through), "a thankless task that optimistically might pay dividends some day" (64). The gamble paid off, and the upshot was an instructor's position at the University of Victoria in 1966, followed by doctoral studies at Queen's University, back at UVic a second time, and eventually settling at the University of New Brunswick in 1974 where he became part of a team of scholars devoted to re-writing the history of Maritime Canada.

To that extent Forbes was an accidental historian, but there was greater deliberation to his becoming an historian of Atlantic Canada. A pivotal moment was being asked, having only just completed his MA, to present a seminar critique of George Rawlyk's (1935-1995) work on the "paranoid style" of Nova Scotia's politics. In front of a gathering of heavies, Forbes asserted that Maritimers had every reason to feel that they had done badly out of Confederation. The reaction was anything but cordial and Forbes was basically told to stop "whining" (70, 119). That experience, and having to endure the usual quota of anti-Maritime jokes, resulted in his choice of topic for his PhD thesis. Published in 1979 as *The Maritime Rights Movement, 1919-1927*,[46] it remains the "authoritative" text[47] — an achievement all the more remarkable given that Forbes was not a high-flier but a late-bloomer.

It is generally acknowledged that the emergence and recognition of scholarly specializations depend on good leadership, a broad consensus on the interpretative thrust, efficient organization, and the rigorous training of initiates – all of which require adequate funding. *The Education of an Innocent* provides a valuable case study of the re-writing of Maritime history at the University of New Brunswick. By the time of Forbes's arrival, the history of the Maritime Provinces was a going concern at UNB; it was "the centre and the vanguard of the research in which I was most interested" (84).[48] Leadership was not so much in the hands of one or two individuals, but was more a

45 This interview was previously published as "A Conversation with Ernest R. Forbes," *Acadiensis* XLI, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2012): 226-38. The two versions are identical, apart from the journal article having a separate introduction.

46 E.R. Forbes, *The Maritime Rights Movement, 1919-1927* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979).

47 Don Nerbas, "Revisiting the Politics of Maritime Rights: Bourgeois Saint John and Regional Protest in the 1920s," *Acadiensis* XXXVII, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2006): 111.

48 See also Judith Fingard, "Focusing on their Roots: University of New Brunswick Historians and Regional History," *Acadiensis* XXX, no. 1 (Autumn 2000): 38-44.

team effort of historians united by a common purpose and objectives (124-5). It also helped that the other members of the Department of History were happy to let the Canadianists do their own thing and to have their share of departmental resources. Publication outlets are crucial in the legitimization of a specialisation and an important step in that direction was the founding of this journal in 1971. *Acadiensis* was a flagship as much as a publication outlet: it lent respectability to the speciality and was a vehicle by which the UNB group could mark out their territory and set the research agenda. Regrettably, Forbes makes no mention of his teaching of undergraduates and barely discusses his supervision of graduate students, although he does mention how the seminars were run.

For all the success of the academic program at UNB, life was not easy. Sometimes it was the aggravations inseparable from academic life. Forbes follows the convention of historians' memoirs in avoiding, or at least moderating, criticism of fellow historians; but he is less inhibited in recounting the bad behaviour of a publisher (90), the debilitating effects of inter-departmental rivalries at UNB (94-5), and the antics of the UNB librarian, who used her position to doctor the minutes of committee meetings (92-3) – which indicates a poor institutional culture at UNB at that time. The (often premature) deaths of friends and associates were another burden, keenly felt and often resulting in depressive episodes (87-9, 125-6). Forbes's safety mechanisms were recreational hunting and fishing as well as family life. Stephen Dutcher points out that "probably more than in many professorial families, Ernie and Irene's lives have struck a deliberate balance between the demands of academia and the needs of family" (6). All the same, *The Education of an Innocent* contains more on hunting and fishing than on family. This, in turn, raises the point that historian autobiographers vary greatly in how they deal with their domestic lives. Most noticeably, they are willing to write at length about their families of origin but are generally reticent about their own immediate families. Even Michael Bliss, who does "not believe that the public and private sides of life can or should be segregated" (14), has little to say specifically about his children, although he makes very clear his gratitude to his wife. True to his title ("Writing History") and subtitle ("A Professor's Life"), Bliss has focused resolutely on his vocation. Such elisions suppress the point that juggling the demands of careers and families is a fact of academic life and thus a valid topic for autobiographical discussion, even when a given book's emphasis is on the career.

Forbes emerges as an immensely likeable and decent person: "A splendid man" is how a Canadian colleague of mine described him. I finished reading *The Education of an Innocent* feeling that Forbes has every reason to look back with satisfaction. Professionally, he was in the right place at the right time, and he took his chances as part of a good team. He was an important figure in the development of the history of the Maritime Provinces and Atlantic Canada generally, and he helped it become the "successful enterprise" that it is today (132-3). And this he did as a committed family man.

The four books under review might be likened to Edward Lear's famous "two owls and a hen, four larks and a wren." They are very different in tone, emphasis, and quality. But what *are* the qualities that auto/biographers should cultivate and nurture? Jim Davidson has laid down the gauntlet, and he lives up to his appeals for artistry:

> A biographer may not be a creative writer in the usual sense of the term, but he or she must be a discriminating processor of factual material, drawing from a variety of sources and levels in order to make the subject live. Moreover, owing to gaps, the biographer's hand is often incomplete, yet must be played as effectively as possible. To change the analogy: what one hopes for is an imaginative portrait of the subject. It must never be a still life.[49]

Not least is the importance of dispensing with the absurdity that auto/biography (and history generally) equate with fiction, on the spurious grounds that such authors deploy literary techniques (as they must).

Davidson's injunction – that your hand must be played as effectively as possible – resonates. The old saying "no documents, no history" is true enough, but the documentation is never complete; and in any case, if the sources are patently insufficient, a full-scale biography will not be attempted. Mark McKenna, the biographer of the singular Australian historian Manning Clark – *An Eye for Eternity: The Life of Manning Clark* – was given access to extraordinarily rich (and contradictory) sources.[50] All the same, it took a particularly accomplished biographer and historian to effectively utilize his bounty. Another outstanding recent example is Michael Bentley's intellectual biography of Herbert Butterfield, which probes the inner recesses of the subject's personality and sexual impulses.[51] The subject and archive are important, the author more so.

With respect to historians' autobiographies, the New Zealand writer Barry Crump sums it up perfectly – so simple and yet so profound: "I suppose anyone who writes [an autobiography] has the same basic problem – what do you put in and what do you leave out[?] A lot has had to be left out, most of it, and I hope that what I've chosen to include proves entertaining."[52] An instructive example of inclusion/exclusion is that neither Frank Milligan nor Helen Forsey mention Eugene Forsey's moral support of Sir John Kerr (1914-1991), the Australian governor-general who dismissed the Whitlam Labor government in November 1975. Forsey thought this important enough to mention emphatically in his autobiography,[53] and one might reasonably expect that his purposeful intervention into such a controversial episode would have been taken up by either or both of his biographers – especially in view of his endorsement (mistakenly, in my view) that Kerr had no alternative but to act as he did. Forsey was so wedded to the notion of the Crown's reserve powers that it warped his judgment in this particular instance.

49 Jim Davidson, "Bouncing on the Trampoline of Fact: Biography and the Historical Imagination," *Australian Book Review* 323 (July-August 2010): 45. Davidson's biographies include *A Three-Cornered Life: The Historian WK Hancock* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2010).

50 Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity: The Life of Manning Clark* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press of Melbourne University Publishing, 2011).

51 Michael Bentley, *The Life and Thought of Herbert Butterfield: History, Science and God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

52 Barry Crump, *The Life and Times of a Good Keen Man: An Autobiography* (Auckland: Hodder Moa Beckett, 1992), 7.

53 Forsey, *A Life on the Fringe*, 198-9.

The recent biographies of C.R. Fay and Eugene Forsey have brought the number of book-length biographies of Canadian historians to at least 11.[54] In proportional and absolute terms, this is a paltry total. Australia, by contrast, has a much smaller historical professional and national population, and yet 18 biographies have been written of Australian historians. Some of this can be put down to the chance event of someone being prepared to invest time and effort into such a commitment. That is certainly so with regard to the biographies of Fay and Forsey.

Less explicable is why only a dozen Canadian historians have written autobiographies, given that history is seldom far away from the interminable identity debates.[55] By comparison, there are over 50 autobiographies of Australian historians – even if this total is predicated on a generous definition as to what constitutes an historian. The frequency of Australian historians' autobiographies has been directly addressed by Jeremy Popkin, and he suggests a convergence of reasons. Briefly, these autobiographies have often made an important contribution to national debates, not least on the recurring question of identity. They are also often of high literary quality and are recognized by literary scholars as having made "an important contribution to their society's overall tradition of first-person writing." The autobiographers are often prominent historians who are well integrated into the country's intellectual and national life, and so have cultural authority. The cumulative effect in Australia is to impart historians' autobiographies with a respectability and legitimacy that encourages imitators. As Popkin says, one can now "speak of a genuine corpus of historians" autobiographies as opposed to a "few isolated individual initiatives."[56] The genre is propelling itself forward under its own momentum. The downside is that Australian historians' autobiographies are not generally an exportable commodity – they are little read outside Australia. Such are the trade-offs for living in an isolated country. But in Canada, instead of historians' memoirs gaining momentum and traction, these works are struggling to constitute an identifiable genre. Although autobiography has not yet been widely embraced by Canadian historians, this may be starting to be reversed by the recently initiated publication of a series of reflections in the *Canadian Historical Review* by eminent and retired historians about their work and the state of Canadian history.

54 In addition to those already mentioned, book-length biographies of Canadian historians include Lewis H. Thomas, *The Renaissance of Canadian History: A Biography of A.L. Burt* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975); Georges-Émile Giguère, *Lionel Groulx: Biographie* (Montréal: Éditions Bellarmin, 1978); Terry Crowley, *Marriage of Minds: Isabel and Oscar Skelton Reinventing Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); and Jean-François Nadeau, *Robert Rumilly, l'homme de Duplessis* (Montréal: Lux, 2009).

55 In addition to those already mentioned, book-length autobiographies of Canadian historians include Arthur Lower, *My First Seventy-Five Years* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1967); Lionel Groulx, *Mes mémoires*, 4 vols. (Montréal: Fides, 1970-1974); Arthur G. Dorland, *Along the Trail of Life: A Quaker Retrospect* (Belleville, ON: Mika Publishing Company, 1979); Pierre Berton, *Starting Out, 1920-1947* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1987); Pierre Berton, *My Times: Living With History, 1917-1995* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 1995); and Marcel Trudel, *Memoirs of a Less Travelled Road: A Historian's Life* (Montreal: Véhicule, 2002).

56 See Jeremy Popkin, "Ego-histoire Down Under: Australian Historian-Autobiographer," *Australian Historical Studies* 38, no. 129 (September 2007): 106-23, as well as Popkin, *History, Historians, & Autobiography*, 90.

The Michael Bliss and Ernie Forbes autobiographies indicate the variability of the genre. Forbes's *The Education of an Innocent* is avowedly modest but makes telling contributions. One is the account of being able to do justice to both his professional and family responsibilities. More often than not with prominent historians, as in the case of Harold Innis, it is the latter that suffered in the headlong pursuit of career advancement. Importantly, Forbes also provides a useful case study in the "regionalization" of history – in this case one person's account of the development of Atlantic Canada historiography as a viable specialization. Forbes played his part in this development but claims no particular credit for himself; others have already acknowledged his contribution. In keeping with his personality, Bliss provides a frank and forthright account of his professional career. In parts it is an angry account, yet although he had adversarial episodes with the University of Toronto and the Canadian historical profession at large he does not engage in the curmudgeonly tirades that occasionally surface in historians' memoirs.[57] One might argue that Forbes and Bliss have written conventional rather than experimental or innovative narratives that extend the boundaries of academic autobiography, but too much can be made of such a criticism. Popkin has discussed this very question – the "reshaping of personal narrative" – and most of the so-called boundary-breaking accounts are different in content rather than in methodology or the deployment of innovative literary techniques.[58] In other words, they deal with matters that were previously hidden from sight, notably the discussions of the author's sexuality. With the inclusion of more intimate details, such as difficult family relations and sexual abuse in childhood, the process of writing about one's self can be emotionally draining.[59]

What to put in and what to leave out are authorial decisions. How to approach the task of writing a biography or an autobiography is ultimately the author's decision. Whether or not to resist pressures from others to avoid mentioning sensitive matters or to portray someone in a certain light are, again, authorial decisions. How well the job is done boils down to the author's skills as the researcher and writer. The biographies of Fay and Forsey, and the autobiographies by Bliss and Forbes, with their different emphases and selection criteria, highlight the fundamental point that the author/historian is central to the writing of history.

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57 See, for example. Norman F. Cantor, *Inventing Norman Cantor: Confessions of a Medievalist* (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2002), and Forrest McDonald, *Recovering the Past: A Historian's Memoir* (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

58 Popkin, *History, Historians, & Autobiography*, 246-76.

59 See, for example, Sheila Fitzpatrick, *My Father's Daughter: Memories of an Australian Childhood* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2010), and Bettina Aptheker, *Intimate Politics: How I Grew Up Red, Fought for Free Speech, and became a Feminist Rebel* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Books, 2006), 543.