

New and Old History in Ontario

John English

Volume 3, numéro 2, spring 1974

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad3_2rv03

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

English, J. (1974). Compte rendu de [New and Old History in Ontario]. *Acadiensis*, 3(2), 110–116.

acter, not on design or advertising. Second, governments might try to produce more of the things which they themselves use. Such "import-replacement" is attractive. The external "supply price" serves as an objective which local production must match, or better. So do the technical standards of the "imports". Yet the local market can be assured.

Perhaps such a plan is politically unrealistic. If so, Atlantic notables will quickly tell us. Certainly the plan has risks — high-cost production, duplication, featherbedding, undue influence, and simple graft. But so do the many schemes by which Maritime manufacturers are already aided. And if the new plants could be inter-governmental, their markets would be larger and their uncertainties somewhat fewer. Whether or not the plan is worth investigating, it is interesting that though George, Sears, and Graham do not make any such suggestion their evidence leads one to do so, and their analyses make it look attractive.

IAN M. DRUMMOND

NEW AND OLD HISTORY IN ONTARIO

"Ontario historians have never had a problem", the editor of *Acadiensis* has written, "for research into an Ontario topic is considered of national importance while similar research into the peripheral areas of Confederation is not".¹ What may appear not to be a problem at the periphery is in fact a major pitfall for historians of Ontario. Undeniably, Ontario, imperial in bearing and ubiquitous in influence, looms above the other provinces in Canadian history texts, which are so often written by Ontario natives or residents. But in the historian's concentration upon Ontario as an actor in the national system, we have learned remarkably little about Ontario itself. The historian's vision of Ontario, like the province itself, has shunned introspection.

Thus, while British Columbia is the subject of two recent provincial histories, Ontario is the subject of none.² Nor has the curious fascination with aberrant behaviour on the part of Canadian historians, a rather conformist lot themselves, led to a thorough and coherent investigation of Ontario's political, administrative, and socio-economic structure as has occurred with Alberta, thanks to Social Credit, and, to a lesser extent, with Saskatche-

1 P.A. Buckner, "Acadiensis II", *Acadiensis*, I (Autumn, 1971), p. 4.

2 Margaret Ormsby, *British Columbia* (Toronto, 1958) and Martin Robin, *The Rush for Spoils: The Company Province, 1871-1933* (Toronto, 1972); *Pillars of Profit: The Company Province, 1934-1972* (Toronto, 1973). The text normally assigned in Ontario History courses is *Profiles of a Province* (Toronto, 1967), a collection of essays.

wan and Quebec.³ How past Ontarians lived, thought, raised families, formed communities, and died was proposed long ago as the proper study for Ontario historians. In 1937, Fred Landon wrote: "Not until we know more intimately the nature of conditions of events in many communities [in 1837] will we have right understanding of the rebellion It was not one rebellion but many rebellions, and to generalize may be an acknowledgement of insufficient evidence".⁴ This plea for local history was rarely heeded; generalization prevailed and the intricate tissue of regional and local history upon which the sophisticated historiography of Britain, the United States, and especially France rests never emerged for Ontario.⁵ This situation, however, is changing.

There are many reasons for the recent and admirable efflorescence of historical studies of Ontario. One factor might be termed the "royal commission effect": the flow of academic interest towards those subjects which the state through royal commissions or other means deems worthy of special attention and therefore subsidy. The extraordinary longevity of the Conservative government of Ontario has apparently created a profound interest in the history of the province. The first evidence of this new historical awareness was the sudden proliferation throughout the province of plaques honouring historic figures and sites. So numerous are these plaques that one is tempted to suggest that their manufacturer must be an important party donor.⁶ A more significant enterprise is the Ontario Historical Studies Series, established by the Ontario government in 1971 "to facilitate research on the lives and times of the Prime Ministers of Ontario and related aspects of Ontario History". The editors, Goldwin French and Peter Oliver, envisage the series as an intensive scrutiny of Ontario's past, comprising many volumes, which will almost certainly be the foundation for future research in Ontario history during the next decade. Since the first volume has not yet appeared, one can only congratulate the editors for their broad conception of their

3 William Lyon Mackenzie and Mitch Hepburn, certainly two of the most incredible public figures in Ontario's history, have attracted much attention. Both are the subject of fine biographies, William Kilbourn's *The Firebrand* (Toronto, 1956) and Neil McKenty's *Mitch Hepburn* (Toronto, 1967), and a large number of articles.

4 Fred Landon, "The Common Man in the Era of the Rebellion in Upper Canada", *Canadian Historical Association Report* (1937), p. 91.

5 For bibliographies of recent work in local history, see Barbara Aitken, *Local Histories of Ontario Municipalities Published in the Years 1957-1972* (Kingston, 1972).

6 The province has been extremely liberal in its definition of a historic site. For example, the University of Waterloo, which was founded in 1957, has already become a historic site through the acquisition of a plaque.

task and the Ontario government for its commendable generosity.⁷

But governmental support is necessarily a response to public and professional interest in a subject. Public interest in Ontario history arose from the re-emergence of nationalist sentiment in the province during the last decade and from a belief that Ontario's rapid urbanization and economic growth would efface the province's past.⁸ Professional interest was spurred by the growing opinion among Canadian historians that the Canadian identity could be best understood through the study of "limited" identities⁹ and by the introduction of the so-called "new history" which proposes to answer larger questions and to test traditional generalizations by means of a thorough examination of a narrow canvas.¹⁰ One discerns the influence of these factors in such recent works as Michael Katz's "new history" project on Hamilton (entitled with characteristic Ontario pretension, *The Canadian Social History Project*),¹¹ *Oliver Mowat's Ontario*,¹² the outgrowth of a colloquium at Queen's University which academics, politicians, and the public attended, and *Aspects of Nineteenth Century Ontario*,¹³ a *Festschrift* presented to Professor James J. Talman of the University of Western Ontario.

Michael Katz's work on Hamilton has two major purposes: "to show the range of questions about ordinary nineteenth-century people that may be asked, and, . . . to sketch the primary social and demographic patterns within a mid-nineteenth century Canadian city".¹⁴ Technique, the application of social scientific methods and theory, is as important as substance, the infor-

7 There will be no dearth of historians to write the studies in the series. There are now nine doctoral programmes in history in the province of Ontario, and, not surprisingly, many of the doctoral candidates have chosen topics in Ontario history for their dissertations. Research from theses now appears regularly in *Ontario History*, the *Canadian Historical Review* and elsewhere. In fact, almost thirty per cent of the articles in *Ontario History* during the last five years were written by graduate students.

8 The numerous campaigns throughout Ontario to save historic structures reveal the depth of this feeling. On historic buildings and preservation in Ontario, see the special issue of *Ontario History* on the subject (September, 1971).

9 J.M.S. Careless, "Limited Identities in Canada", *Canadian Historical Review*, LI (1970), pp. 1-10.

10 Pierre Goubert asserts that the importance of regional history in France, the leader in the field, was to challenge "some of the 'general' ideas, prejudices and approximations that had held sway in the absence of more precise investigation". Pierre Goubert, "Local History", in Felix Gilbert and Stephen Graubard, eds., *Historical Studies Today* (New York, 1972), p. 304.

11 Michael Katz, *The Hamilton Project: Interim Reports I and II* (Toronto, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1969, 1970); "Social Structure in Hamilton, Ontario", in S. Thernstrom and R. Sennett, eds., *Nineteenth Century Cities: Essays in the New Urban History* (New Haven and London, 1969), pp. 209-44; and "The People of a Canadian City: 1851-2", *Canadian Historical Review*, LIII (1972), pp. 402-26.

12 Donald Swainson, ed., *Oliver Mowat's Ontario* (Toronto, Macmillan, 1972).

13 F.H. Armstrong, H.A. Stevenson, J.D. Wilson, eds., *Aspects of Nineteenth Century Ontario: Essays Presented to James J. Talman* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1974).

14 Katz, "The People of a Canadian City: 1851-2", p. 403.

mation conveyed. This emphasis on method is neither unusual nor deplorable: after all, Ranke shared the trait. But one must surely deprecate the evangelistic and exclusive tone which pervades Katz's work. The "new social history" is peddled as patent medicine once was: take a liberal quantity of statistics, toss in a dash of social theory, sift skilfully with a computer, then — eureka — you have written a "new" (and better) history.¹⁵ The familiar criticisms of the "new history", some profound, some rather foolish, need not be reiterated here.¹⁶ What deserves examination is the extent to which Katz has accomplished his stated purposes in his study of Hamilton.

In his first purpose, Katz, one of the most creative young historians in North America, has succeeded admirably: he has indicated a whole range of questions and sources which a large number of Ontario historians, many of them Katz's students, are now pursuing.¹⁷ In his second purpose, Katz is less successful. We have learned a great deal about Hamilton in 1851, the size of its families, the distribution of its economic resources, and the transiency of its population, and these findings have been compared to those for American cities on which similar research is available. The freshness or revisionism of Katz's conclusions, however, is claimed rather than established. No Ontario historian (Katz cites none) would ever have imagined Hamilton to possess a "stable" population in 1851, so soon after the potato famine and during the "Canadian Commercial Revolution". Nor does the evidence that the Irish and the Catholics were the poorest, that the Scottish and Canadian children were more often in school, and that economic wealth meant political power astonish anyone. The so-called "stereotypes" of nineteenth-century life, straw men which Katz proceeds to knock down, are not the creations of Canadian historians.

Here we encounter the most disappointing aspect of Katz's work. As Dickens once spoke of Mrs. Jellyby's telescopic charity, one might speak of Katz's telescopic history. Katz's essays on Hamilton are replete with references to international historical studies such as Thernstrom on cities, Laslett on families, Wrigley on population, and Dahrendorf on class, but only rarely does one find a reference to the work of an historian of Canada,

15 See *ibid.*, p. 426, n. 37.

16 See, for example, Jacques Barzun, "History: The Muse and Her Doctors", *American Historical Review*, 77 (1972), pp. 36-64; Philip Abrams, "Sociology and History I", *Past and Present*, 52 (August, 1971), pp. 118-26 and Geoffrey Elton, *Political History: principles and practice* (New York, 1970).

17 See the special Canadian issue of *History of Education Quarterly* (fall, 1972) which was edited by Katz. Also, Susan Houston, "Politics, Schools, and Social Change in Upper Canada", *Canadian Historical Review*, LIII (1972), pp. 249-71; Harvey Graff, "Literacy and Social Structure in Elgin County, Canada West: 1861", *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, VI (April, 1973), pp. 25-48; and David Gagan and Herbert Mays, "Historical Demography and Canadian Social History: Families and Land in Peel County, Ontario", *Canadian Historical Review*, LIV (1973), pp. 27-47.

Ontario, or Hamilton.¹⁸ Tucker's *The Canadian Commercial Revolution*, the extensive work of Maurice Careless, and numerous theses and articles which would have placed the social changes which Katz identifies in a larger context are not cited. Even histories of Hamilton and of the surrounding area, such as McMaster historian C. M. Johnston's *The Head of the Lake: A history of Wentworth County*,¹⁹ which do reveal internal and external determinants of Hamilton's development are ignored. Katz calls for studies similar to his own to be done on other Canadian cities, and presumably this is how Katz envisages his work fitting into future Canadian historiography. These future studies, however, must indicate an awareness of the broader context. If they do not, the "new local history" will become at best an expensive technical exercise and at worst a unique kind of antiquarianism.

Oliver Mowat's Ontario ties together several threads of contemporary research in Ontario history to form overall an attractive fabric. Purchase of the paperback is recommended however: this is not a volume for the ages. Many of the contributions are summaries of or excerpts from recently completed theses; others are "a sample of the important research now being pursued [in Ontario history]".²⁰ The venerable fascination with Ontario's role in Confederation continues, notably in the articles by Bruce Hodgins, Carman Miller, and Christopher Armstrong which prove that the old stock, federal-provincial relations, can often bear fresh fruit.²¹ Particularly interesting is the always provocative Michael Bliss's argument that a "protective impulse", a desire to reduce the effects of competition, motivated Ontario professional and business groups during the late nineteenth century. This interpretation, which owes much to American business history, deserves elaboration and further research. H. V. Nelles' study of resource development policy provides additional evidence for Professor Bliss's claims. One looks forward to more.²²

One essay in *Oliver Mowat's Ontario* deserves special comment. Peter Waite's "Sir Oliver Mowat's Canada: Reflections on an un-Victorian Society" is, as one would expect, witty, intelligent, and often evocative. Nevertheless,

18 In "The People of a Canadian City: 1851-2", Katz refers only to the urban geographer Peter Goheen's *Victorian Toronto 1850 to 1900* (Chicago, 1970). In "Social Structure in Hamilton, Ontario", Katz refers to several theoretical articles by Canadian historians and to the work of John Porter. Monographs, descriptive articles, and general histories of the Hamilton area are ignored.

19 (2nd ed., Hamilton, 1967). Also, Marjorie Freeman Campbell, *A Mountain and a City* (Toronto, 1966).

20 Donald Swainson, "Introduction", in *Oliver Mowat's Ontario*, p. 8.

21 Hodgins, "Disagreement at the Commencement: Divergent Ontarian Views of Federalism, 1867-1871"; Miller, "Mowat, Laurier and the Federal Liberal Party, 1887-1897"; and Armstrong, "The Mowat Heritage in Federal-Provincial Relations".

22 See H.V. Nelles, "The Politics of Development: Forest, Mines and Hydro-Electric Power in Ontario, 1890-1939" (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1970) and Michael Bliss, *A Living Profit* (forthcoming).

Waite's argument that late nineteenth-century Canadian society cannot be described by the adjective "Victorian" is neither convincing nor worth the making.²³ No reader of Engels or Dickens, much less *My Secret Life*, can possibly believe that "Victorian" implies solely an "unfrivolous dedication to work and purity". To British historians, who have faced the same semantical question, "Victorian" has a distinct and broad connotation: of a temper of mind in which faith and doubt, passion and reason, blend in an exquisite tension and of an age "swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight" beneath a surface calm. To limit "Victorian" to superficial piety is to narrow severely our vision of the age.²⁴

Oliver Mowat's Ontario commemorates the 150th anniversary of the birth of Ontario's greatest premier; *Aspects of Nineteenth Century Ontario* honours one of the province's most devoted students, James J. Talman of the University of Western Ontario. As a provincial archivist, as a librarian who preserved records of Ontario's past when many saw little value in them, and, not least, as an historian, Talman has served his province well. It is, therefore, entirely appropriate that Talman's students, friends, and colleagues have chosen to honour him with a collection of essays on nineteenth-century Ontario. Normally a *Festschrift* is an intellectual potpourri of little academic value. With its coherent theme, this volume is a fortunate exception. As a result, *Aspects of Nineteenth Century Ontario* will likely become a standard text for Ontario historians for the next few years.

To Talman who laboured long in the noble but lonely vineyards of Ontario regional history while others basked in the imperial or national glow, the *Festschrift's* emphasis upon Ontario's internal development must be particularly gratifying. Leo Johnson's "The Settlement of the Western District 1749-1850" extends Johnson's important work on settlement patterns and land policy in Upper Canada. Fred Armstrong and Daniel Brock examine the reasons for the pre-eminence of London in Southwestern Ontario, pointing out the autonomous and dependent factors in London's development. Proving the value of an interdisciplinary approach to the past, W. R. Wightman, a geographer, uses census data to discover the kinds of homes in which our Ontario ancestors dwelt. In this excellent article, Wightman demonstrates how much we can learn about the relationship between man and his immediate environment. David Gagan employs deeds and other sources to investi-

23 The influence of Professor Waite's argument is seen in Donald Swainson, "Schuyler Shibley and the Underside of Victorian Ontario", *Ontario History*, LXV (March, 1973), pp. 51-60.

24 In his classic study *Victorian England: Portrait of an Age* (New York, 1957), G.M. Young identified the Evangelical and Utilitarian strains of early nineteenth-century thought. "Each", Young wrote, "imparted its peculiar virtue: the Evangelicals their zeal for holiness, the Utilitarians their faith in reason, to the movements, even to the reactions which sprang out of them, to Tractarians and Agnostics who denied their introspective ethic, to Tories, and Socialists who challenged their conception of the competitive state" (p. 26). Waite is isolating the Evangelical strain and ignoring its complement and its heirs.

gate mortgaging in Toronto Gore Township. His results are even more important to economic historians than to social historians, a fact which again suggests the efficacy of collaborative and co-operative efforts. J. M. S. Careless outlines an analytical framework for the study of Ontario urbanization, a framework whose value will be determined in Careless' forthcoming study of Canadian urbanization. Unfortunately, there are too many essays (nineteen) to outline all of them. Several, it should be noted, were written by amateur historians, a group to which professional historians in Ontario owe a great deal. Of the articles by non-historians, James Reaney's study of myths in some nineteenth-century Ontario newspapers is the most promising and the most disappointing. Surely the artist who explored so brilliantly the mythic and moral dimensions of the Donnelly tragedy could have given us more than a newspaper miscellany.

In reading the book, one is reminded of Richard Hofstadter's description of the growth of complexity in American historiography since the 1950's: "an engaging and moving simplicity, accessible to the casual reader of history has given way to a new awareness of the multiplicity of forces".²⁵ Clearly, Ontario history is now in the middle stage of such a transformation when generalizations of the past are being modified or abandoned and the faint outlines of an intricate synthesis are emerging. Esthetically, this particular stage is unattractive, since its history tends to be monographic, highly specific, and, if compared to the earlier narrative stage, rather dull. Consequently, many general readers may be disappointed. On the other hand, the new techniques, the novel subjects, and the inchoate syntheses will fascinate the professional historian. In its recognition of the continuity of historical research in Ontario, *Aspects of Nineteenth Century Ontario* is a reassuring work. As Ontario history moves towards a greater complexity and sophistication, one has confidence that it will embrace neither sterile revisionism nor narrow positivism.

JOHN ENGLISH

FORT, FOG AND FIDDLEHEAD: SOME NEW ATLANTIC WRITING

How often, in despair of locating "the specifically Canadian quality" in the work of writers as diverse as Morley Callaghan, Irving Layton, Margaret Laurence and E. J. Pratt, we have taken to talking of "writing in Canada" instead of "Canadian writing". And have not some of us some of the time been half-willing to allow that "Canadian literature" is really nothing more than a loose aggregate of regional literatures — West Coast, Maritime, Ontario, Prairie, Quebec — each with its own unmistakable and non-transferable,

25 Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians* (New York, 1970), p. 442.