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Discourse, Power and Tradition:
Approach and Method in Recent English-Canadian Intellectual History

Donald Wright

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> Intellectual history "has no governing *problématique*. Its practitioners share no sense of common subjects, methods and conceptual strategies".[1]

AT A TIME WHEN SCHOLARS BORROW freely from disciplines other than their own, and as boundaries between and within disciplines become increasingly blurred, it is not an easy task to assemble a review article on intellectual history, let alone survey ways of writing intellectual history. Indeed, of the six authors under review, two are historians (Barry Ferguson and Donald Horton), two are political scientists (Robert Vipond and William Christian), one a sociologist (Mariana Valverde) and one a geographer (Kay Anderson). No doubt some of these scholars will find it oddly amusing to discover themselves included in a review of recent English-Canadian intellectual history. Yet, uniting this admittedly disparate group is a shared commitment to the human mind, ideas and their importance in historical processes. Against this backdrop, what follows is an attempt to outline three distinct approaches employed in the writing of English-Canadian intellectual history: discourse analysis, the history of political thought and biography.[2]

In her much talked about treatise, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1991) Mariana Valverde, taking her cue from literary criticism and new theories of language and power, places primacy on the role of discourses in "actively organizing both social relations and people's feelings" (p. 9). Indeed, Valverde's attention to language as something contestable is a refreshing tonic to a discipline that has historically treated language as something fixed.[3] Language is not simply a neutral medium; it does not merely name or reflect a pre-existing reality. Rather, language, or discourses (surely the most commonly used, and least rigorously defined, term in the vocabulary of today's intellectual historians) are "organized sets of signifying practices" (p. 10). Following Foucault, Valverde takes discourses to refer to more or less objective phenomena with their own quasi-autonomous histories; constituted by rules, systems of statements and signs, discourses determine, order and legitimate what can be said and how it can be said. Fundamentally, discourses are about power. Power, therefore, is discursive, relational, dispersed, not something singular and monolithic, to be seized in a

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1   Robert Darnton, "Intellectual and Cultural History", in *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (New York, 1990), pp. 206-07.

2   For analysis of the recurring themes in English-Canadian intellectual history see, for example, Douglas Owram, "Intellectual History in the Land of Limited Identities", *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 24, 3 (Fall 1989), pp. 114-28; and Clarence Karr, "What Happened to Canadian Intellectual History?", *Acadiensis*, XVIII, 2 (Spring 1989), pp. 158-74.

3   See Linda Orr, "The Revenge of Literature: A History of History", *New Literary History*, 18, 1 (Autumn 1986), pp. 1-22; and David Harlan, "Intellectual History and the Return of Literature", *American Historical Review*, 94, 3 (June 1989), pp. 581-609.

revolutionary struggle. However, Valverde is quick to avoid a 'descent into discourse': "social and economic relations", she writes, "are [not] created *ex nihilo* by words" (p. 10). Nonetheless, "practical social relations are always mediated and articulated through linguistic and non-linguistic signifying practices" (p. 11). Archaeologically recoverable, discourses, these linguistic and non-linguistic signifying practices, become for Valverde the focus of her inquiry, and discourse analysis her primary methodology.[4]

At the same time, Valverde modifies Foucault's archaeology. Whereas he conceded little autonomy to the subject — "I shall abandon any attempt..." Foucault wrote in the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, "to see discourse as a phenomenon of expression"[5] — Valverde, like Chris Weedon, maintains an important commitment to social agency, to the (at least partial) autonomy of the subject.[6]

> The decentring of the subject and the recognition of the power of discourse, while questioning triumphalist ideas about 'the working class' and about 'Woman,' do not mean that actual women and/or workers can find no basis of unity, no common interests, or that their own discourses can be so cleverly deconstructed that no difference remains between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses (p. 43).

Without resurrecting the assumptions of the Great Man or the Great Woman schools of history, *The Age of Light, Soap and Water* therefore contains "occasional forays into biography" in a self-conscious insistence on (the possibility

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4   Less an exact science and more an approach, a way of seeing things, discourse analysis is difficult to define. Still, it is pertinent to offer, at length, what Foucault meant by discourse analysis. "Generally speaking", he wrote,

> the analysis of discourse operates between the twin poles of totality and plethora. One shows how the different texts with which one is dealing refer to one another, organize themselves into a single figure, converge with institutions and practices, and carry meanings that may be common to a period. Each element considered is taken as an expression of the totality to which it belongs and whose limits it exceeds. And in this way one substitutes for the diversity of the things said a sort of great, uniform text, which has never before been articulated, and which reveals for the first time what men 'really meant' not only in their words and texts, their discourses and their writings, but also in the institutions, practices, techniques, and objects that they produced. In relation to this implicit, sovereign 'meaning', statements appear in superabundant proliferation, since it is to that meaning alone that they all refer and to it alone that they owe their truth: a plethora of signifying elements in relation to this single 'signified' (*signifié*). But this primary and ultimate meaning springs up through the manifest formulations, it hides beneath what appears, and secretly duplicates it, because each discourse contains the power to say something other than what it actually says, and thus to embrace a plurality of meanings: a plethora of the 'signified' in relation to a single 'signifier'.

Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York, 1972), p. 118.

5   Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p. 55. See Hayden White, "Foucault's Discourse: The Historiography of Anti-Humanism" in *Content of the Form* (Baltimore, 1987).

6   See Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Post-Structuralist Theory* (London, 1987).

of) human agency, and in a self-conscious effort to enliven and make concrete the narrative (p. 12).

Valverde's "mix of methods and languages", her "eclecticism as an historian", allows her to portray the social purity movement as neither neat nor tidy (pp. 12, 13). That is, while "[m]oral regulation is an important aspect of ruling, helping to constitute class, gender, sexual, and race relations", the social purity movement was never a simple exercise in social control (p. 166). Indeed, Valverde deliberately and forcefully eschews the simplistic, formulaic model of social control, what T.J. Jackson Lears describes as "the favorite dead horse lashed by contemporary cultural historians".[7] Simply put, there were no Machiavellian plans cooked up in the kitchens of the affluent to control the bedrooms of the poor.

Moreover, Valverde's focus on discourse, her emphasis on power as relational, and her rejection of unidimensional, static, top-down explanations all lead to what I take to be her most exciting, most original, contribution: the concept of slippages. In her discussions on white slavery and immigration as moral panics, Valverde introduces what she calls "the back-and-forth 'slippage' among categories such as class, gender, sexuality and race" (p. 90). White slavery, for example, existed not as a problem to be solved; rather, it "acted as a funnel for a variety of social fears", including "young women moving to cities and taking up new occupations, urban anonymity, immigration [and] the breakdown of traditional networks of support" (pp. 98, 103). Necessarily flexible, the moral panic over white slavery slipped back and forth between discussions of gender, race and class; it offered a point of intersection for a variety of discourses and social anxieties. As a social metonymy invoking a broad conservative agenda, the contemporary panic over family values is likewise based on fear. Indeed, it is here, in her discussion of white slavery, that Valverde reveals her commitment to history as political praxis.

> In today's Canada we no longer worry about white slavers, but large scale panics have been organized around the issues of abortion, pornography, and AIDS. The particular issues around which panics coalesce change over time, and therefore the content of the white slavery panic is historically specific: but the structure of the panic and its methods have a broader relevance. Thus, the analysis will focus as much on the forms used to mobilize people as on the content (pp. 89-90).

Writing the history of early 20th-century English Canada, in other words, constitutes political engagement with late 20th-century Canada.

Valverde, furthermore, broadens the definition of what constitutes a historical source to include non-verbal, tangible objects and again distinguishes her history from more traditional history which relies on the written and spoken word, the speech, the pamphlet, the sermon, the book. Not unlike Keith Walden, then, who

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7   T.J. Jackson Lears, "Power, Culture and Memory", *Journal of American History*, 75, 1 (June 1988), p. 140.

reads turn-of-the-century grocery store window displays as texts,[8] Valverde treats Salvation Army matches and bars of soap as texts capable of being read, as the sources upon which to base truth claims. She contends that, for example, Salvation Army matches "represent the illumination of social conditions and the spiritual fire of evangelism", while Happy Thought Soap not only "produces cleanliness, but it leads another life as a signifier of temperance and purity" (p. 41). While this may or may not be true (sometimes a bar of soap is simply a bar of soap), Valverde nonetheless offers an example for historians interested in moving beyond the printed and spoken word.[9] After all, if an object — be it a bar of soap or a box of matches — can be situated as a system of signifying elements, or as part of a larger such system, then a textual reading is as legitimate as a reading of, say, a Rev. Shearer sermon, which is itself a system. As with any source, the historian must be careful not to isolate an object but to foreground its original context, its original constellation. Theorizes Grant McCracken, "The meaning of a good is best (and sometimes only) communicated when this good is surrounded by a complement of goods that carry the same significance.... In other words, the symbolic properties of material culture are such that things must mean together if they are to mean at all".[10] However, as legitimate and provocative as her approach is, Valverde's ultimate conclusion remains untenable: although "the discrete images, terms, and tangible objects are not arranged according to a one-to-one correspondence of signifier and signified...*the audiences knew precisely what was meant by the complex metaphors and chains of metonymies*" (p. 41, emphasis mine). In point of fact, she neither defines her audiences nor offers any evidence to support her claim that they understood precisely what was meant.

Indeed, it is here, in Valverde's inability to excavate the audience's consciousness and her concomitant focus on *the producer*, on the Anglo-Saxon, middle-class philanthropist, that her work is at its weakest. The impoverished immigrant and the "fallen woman" remain conspicuously silent. Reader-response criticism tells us that the readers, or *the consumers,* in this case those on the receiving end of the social purity discourse, construct their own meanings, that they appropriate what they want and discard the rest, they rearrange and reconfigure a text to their own ends, independent of authorial intention. Michel de Certeau, for example, "stressed the creativity of ordinary people in the sphere of consumption, their active reinterpretations of the messages beamed at them and their tactics for adapting the system of material objects to their own ends".[11] Valverde's inattention to the consumer, to voices of resistance and negotiation, attenuates her claim that the discourse of social purity had, in effect, "real social power", that it was capable

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8   Keith Walden, "Speaking Modern: Language, Culture and Hegemony in Grocery Window Displays, 1887-1920", *Canadian Historical Review,* 70, 3 (September 1989), pp. 285-310.

9   See also James A. Leith, *Space and Revolution: Projects for Monuments, Squares, and Public Buildings in France, 1789-1799* (Montreal and Kingston, 1991).

10 Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington, 1988), p. 121.

11 See Peter Burke, *History and Social Theory* (Ithaca, 1993), pp. 97-8.

of "organizing and mediating the social relations of both producers and consumers" alike (p. 42). Moreover, and perhaps more significantly, the silence of the consumer amidst the din of the producer gives the impression of top-down social control, precisely what Valverde sought to avoid.

Valverde's commitment to exploring new theories of language and power is at once her greatest strength and weakness; this same irony informs Kay Anderson's monograph, *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's, 1991). To begin, Anderson disregards the distinction between the ideal and the material, arguing that they constitute "mutually confirming axes" (p. 74). "Many have argued that racial ideology had its genesis in the exploitative economic system of capitalism that required a cheap and dispensable labour force and a racially divided working class" (p. 21). However, "to understand why people from China were cheap labour in the first place requires recognition of both the force of ideological conceptions of the Chinese as a category and the effectiveness of official representations of them as alien" (p. 22). So it is that Anderson focuses her research on the discourse of race.

Because race is not a natural or biological category but a cultural one, Anderson seeks to measure what she terms the "race-definition process" (p. 9), that is, how the Euro-Canadian majority has historically defined the "Chinese".[12] Underlying the historical transition of "Chinese" as a signifier for unsanitary heathens to "Chinese" as a signifier for valued members of a multicultural Canada, is "Chinese" as Other. Taking Foucault's definition, the Other is "that which, for a given culture, is at once interior and foreign, therefore to be excluded (so as to exorcise the interior danger)".[13] "Despite placing a positive connotation on 'Otherness'", Anderson argues with convincing vigour, "multicultural rhetoric supports popular beliefs about 'differences' between groups of settlers and strengthens the exclusionary concept of a mainstream (Anglo-European) society to which 'others' contribute" (p. 27). In other words, there is an underlying continuity to the racial discourse in Canada: the constructed dualisms of us/them, whites/not-whites, Self/Other have historically worked to perpetuate Euro-Canadian hegemony and, in this case, Chinese subordination. After all, notes Edward Said, "no identity can ever exist by itself and without an array of opposites, negatives, oppositions: Greeks always require barbarians, and Europeans Africans, Orientals, etc.".[14]

Vancouver's Chinatown, it follows, was/is as much a Euro-Canadian construction as it was/is a physical entity; it was/is a "physical manifestation" of a historically contingent "cultural abstraction" (p. 8). Here Anderson acknowledges an intellectual debt to Edward Said's notion of imaginative geographies. "What we see 'out there' in the built and physical landscape is not objectively given, as many social scientists once assumed, but rather is the transformation into material form of past and newly forming beliefs and practices", Anderson writes. "The built

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12 Because Anderson at times places quotation marks around the term "Chinese" in a deliberate effort to foreground the "Chinese" as a social construction, I too will employ quotation marks.

13 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York, 1975), p. xxiv.

14 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993), p. 52.

and physical environments are negotiated realities...linked in circular relation to ideological formations, systems of power, and sets of social relations" (p. 28). Like Valverde's project, only on a much larger scale, Anderson reads the landscape as a non-verbal signifying practice, as a text expressing Euro-Canadian representations of the "Chinese" Other. In the end, Chinatown served/serves a key ideological function: a necessary Euro-Canadian construct, Chinatown acted/acts, not unlike the moral panic over white slavery, as a medium, as a site for the intersection and organization of historically specific Euro-Canadian representations of the Chinese Other.15 "Every city needs its Chinatown, it seems, and Vancouver has been no exception" (p. 27).

Vancouver's Chinatown relies heavily on Antonio Gramcsi's concept of cultural hegemony and it is here that Anderson falls short. The utility of cultural hegemony lies in its rejection of stasis and its insistence on flux, simultaneity, accommodation, resistance, negotiation and re-negotiation. "The overall picture that Gramsci provides is not a static, closed system of ruling-class domination. Rather, it is a society in constant process, where the creation of counterhegemonies remains a live option".16 Yet, the overall picture Anderson provides is one of a Euro-Canadian elite imposing its successive definitions of "Chinese" on a community marked by its passivity and acquiescence. Her introductory assertion that "Vancouver's 'Chinese' have been by no means passive in the race-definition process" is no doubt true but remains largely unexplored (p. 28). It is not until the final chapters, detailing Anderson's analysis of the tourism imperative and multiculturalism, that Chinese actors emerge. To be fair, she concedes that her argument "does not exhaust the ways of conceptualizing the Chinatowns of Western settings", that "an interpretation that entertains only some of the views of Chinatown's residents can hardly be said to be complete" (p. 251). Still, Anderson's race-definition *process* and her notion of the physical environment as *negotiated* reality lack the required dynamism and might, given her own frank admission, more accurately be conceived as the race-definition *imposition* and the physical environment as *dictated* reality. Indeed, Anderson treats both Vancouver's white European community and Vancouver's Chinese community as undifferentiated masses, one over the other, with no sensitivity to respective internal gender, ethnic and class divisions.

Antonio Gramsci, furthermore, deliberately decentred the state in his work, adopting instead a theory of hegemony rooted in civil society, in what he defined as "the ensemble of organisms commonly called 'private'": churches, media and

15 For further reading on geography as a social/cultural construction see, Kay Anderson and Fay Gale, eds., *Inventing Places: Studies in Cultural Geography* (Melbourne, 1992); James Duncan and David Ley, eds., *Place/Culture/Representation* (London, 1993); Rob Shields, *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity* (London, 1990); and Karen Dubinsky, "'The Pleasure is Exquisite but Violent': The Imaginary Geography of Niagara Falls in the Nineteenth Century", *Journal of Canadian Studies,* 29, 2 (Summer 1994), pp. 64-88.

16 T.J. Jackson Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities", *American Historical Review,* 90, 3 (June 1985), p. 571.

voluntary organizations, including trade unions and political parties.[17] Whereas Valverde problematizes the relationship between state and civil society, arguing that civil society — in this case private organizations dedicated to social purity — was ahead of the state in the arena of moral and sexual regulation, Anderson privileges the state. Although not entirely absent (for example, Anderson makes passing reference to the fact that "the professions of pharmacy, dentistry and law" sought, in the 1920s, "occupational closure against people of Chinese origin") civil society remains largely unexplored (p. 128). Without denying white hegemony, Anderson's argument would have been even more convincing had she been more attentive to civil society.

All told, Valverde's and Anderson's works are important contributions to English-Canadian historiography not simply because they add nuance and complexity to our understanding of the past, but because they also enrich our ways of writing intellectual history. Still, more traditional methods (which Valverde once characterized as "breezy" in style and based on "the ideas of somewhat arbitrarily chosen thinkers"[18]) continue to be practised, especially in works which focus on the history of political thought. Witness Robert Vipond's study, *Liberty and Community: Canadian Federalism and the Failure of the Constitution* (Albany, State University of New York, 1991).[19]

Based on his 1983 Harvard dissertation, Vipond's monograph presents English-Canadian historiography with an important re-reading of the Confederation debates and the Ontario provincial rights movement. As a graduate student in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Vipond found himself exposed to a lively debate in American academic circles on the origins and meaning of republicanism in the founding of the United States. That debate, coupled with a suspicion that the coming together of the United Province of Canada, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia could not possibly have been as expedient as he had been led to believe, prompted Vipond to take seriously the intellectual roots of Confederation and the subsequent provincial rights movement. In addition to interpretations which emphasize partisan conflict, the personal antipathy between Macdonald and Mowat, and elite economic interests, Vipond sees the confrontation between the dominion government and the government of Ontario as a confrontation between competing ideas, between competing, *but by no means incompatible,* visions: liberty on the one hand, community on the other. To be sure, Canada lacked a Madison, no one has compared to Jefferson, and, while he may have been many things, Macdonald was no Hamilton. Still, our early politicians were not daft, nor were their debates intellectually uninformed. Vipond argues, in opposition to the Creightonian interpretation, that the proponents of provincial rights correctly understood the BNA Act to be an expression of Madisonian, or classical,

17 David Forgacs, ed., *A Gramsci Reader* (London, 1988), p. 306.
18 Mariana Valverde, "Pauperism, Moral Character and the Liberal State", *Labour/Le Travail*, 30 (Fall 1992), p. 214.
19 Given Vipond's focus on the provincial rights movement in Ontario during the first generation of Confederation his title is rather misleading.

federalism, and that their reading of the Act was, in point of fact, the more accurate reading: "like it or not, the idea of constitutional federalism in Canada has been here from the start". [20] Moreover, and like Valverde, Vipond writes with an eye to the present: the provincial rights discourse provides a way of mediating, or reconciling, the current impasse. Informing "the deep tension between the defence of self-governing communities and the protection of individual and minority rights, between community and liberty, is a common commitment to liberalism" (p. 197). It has been our collective failure to treat "liberty and community as simple antimonies" (p. 196). That liberalism, furthermore, has been distinctly communitarian: "For if the individual's identity is constituted in an important way by the larger community, it is no less true that the individual's freedom to express that identity is paramount" (pp. 92-93).

In terms of approach, *Liberty and Community* is not unlike much of English-Canadian intellectual history. Douglas Owram's *The Promise of Eden* and Michael Behiels' *Prelude to the Quiet Revolution* are illustrative: written as dissertations in the 1970s, a period when Marxist theory and social history enjoyed ascendancy, both books emphasize the intimate relationship of society to ideas and of ideas to society, or what Jackson Lears describes as the circular interaction of mental life and material life within an organic whole. [21] That is, both historians understood that it was no longer tenable to lay claims to the autonomy of ideas, to the capacity of ideas to set the course of history. In response, they adopted an internal/external analysis. [22] The trick here is to simultaneously explicate the nuts and bolts of an idea, its internal mechanics, to locate that idea in its historically specific socio-economic context, and, in the end, demonstrate how that idea shaped, informed or animated its external environment. This is precisely the path Vipond follows.

Furthermore, in an effort to better bridge the internal mechanics of the provincial rights argument and the external world of late 19th-century Ontario, Vipond cites the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Geertz viewed ideology as a cultural system, a matrix of beliefs, values and symbols through which people make sense of, and attach meaning to, their world. Although his influence is difficult to measure with any degree of precision, Geertz, with his notions of thick description, local knowledge and symbolic meaning, has had a lasting impact on the writing of intellectual history, particularly American intellectual history. Fifteen years ago, John Higham and Paul Conkin described Geertz as "virtually the patron saint" of

20 Robert C. Vipond, "1787 and 1867: The Federal Principle and Canadian Confederation Reconsidered", *Canadian Journal of Political Science,* 22, 1 (March 1989), p. 25.

21 Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony", p. 570. See Douglas Owram, *Promise of Eden: The Canadian Expansionist Movement and the Idea of the West* (Toronto, 1980); Michael Behiels, *Prelude to Quebec's Quiet Revolution: Liberalism versus Neo-Nationalism, 1945-1960* (Montreal and Kingston, 1985).

22 See Douglas Owram, "Writing About Ideas", in John Schultz, ed., *Writing About Canada: A Handbook for Modern Canadian History* (Scarborough, 1990).

the Wingspread Conference on New Directions in American Intellectual History.[23] Vipond contends that a Geertzian approach "makes it easier to understand why such apparently mundane 'facts' as widening streams, enforcing insurance contracts and conferring honorary titles became controversial 'law'" (p. 10). Geertz, writes Vipond,

> has led the way in suggesting that, at a deeper level, law exists as one of the ways in which people make sense of the world around them and make it coherent. As [he] puts it, 'law' provides a way by which we sort out and give meaning to social 'facts'. Far from being a mere instrument of political interest, Geertz tells us, law serves both to reflect and embody distinctive 'visions of community' (p. 9).

In interpreting the provincial rights movement as part of Ontario's process of self-definition, Vipond joins Paul Romney and Sidney Noel, both of whom insist on treating Upper Canada and late 19th-century Ontario as a single political entity in the process of developing its own political culture, its own symbols and traditions.[24]

However, because reference to Geertz is made only in the introduction and the conclusion, Vipond's use of a Geertzian framework is more suggestive than sustained, more asserted than argued. After all, the law might also be conceived as a means by which elites reflect and embody *their*, as opposed to *our*, visions of community; that is, the law might be conceived as the calcification of unjust social and economic relations. Indeed, Vipond himself suggests as much when he rightly points out that the community envisioned by the provincial rights movement "entailed a basic ambivalence, if not hostility, to the ideal of full democratic participation" (p. 147).

Liberty and Community is an important book, not only for its argument but also for its methodological focus on individuals *qua* individuals. In this respect, Vipond resembles the British intellectual historian, J.G.A. Pocock. In his 1985 collection of essays, *Virtue, Commerce and History*, Pocock indicated his preference for the history of political thought (the history of "men and women thinking") over the history of political discourse (which, in the Foucauldian tradition, disperses the subject, reducing people to "mere mouthpiece[s]" of their own language). In the end, Pocock seeks an intellectual history that is "ideologically liberal", one that preserves the autonomous, rational subject of liberalism.[25] Whereas Valverde focuses on discourse with only occasional forays into biography, Vipond makes individuals "the pillars on which [his] study rests" (p. 13). And, far from choosing

23 John Higham and Paul Conkin, eds., *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (Baltimore, 1979), p. xvi.

24 See Paul Romney, *Mr Attorney: The Attorney General for Ontario in Court, Cabinet, and Legislature, 1791-1899* (Toronto, 1986); and Sidney Noel, *Patrons, Clients, Brokers: Ontario Society and Politics, 1791-1896* (Toronto, 1991).

25 J.G.A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 1, 5, 34.

his actors arbitrarily, Vipond deliberately centres men like Oliver Mowat, Edward Blake and David Mills precisely because "they developed the ideology of provincial autonomy most clearly, most comprehensively and most thoroughly" (p. 13).

Vipond's work, both in content (Canadian communitarian liberalism) and approach (an emphasis on political thought and political thinkers), forms a convenient introduction to Barry Ferguson's book, *Remaking Liberalism: The Intellectual Legacy of Adam Shortt, O.D. Skelton, W.C. Clark, and W.A. Mackintosh, 1890-1925* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's, 1993). A significant contribution to Canadian historiography by a scholar trained as an intellectual historian, *Remaking Liberalism* challenges the hegemony of Christian idealism in turn-of-the-century Anglo-Canadian reform thought at the same time as it posits the important existence of what Ferguson terms "a vigorous, distinctive, and coherent new liberalism" (p. xv).

Ferguson argues that both historians and political scientists — because they have wrongly equated pre-1940 Canadian liberalism with unchecked individualism, unrestrained market forces, a naive complicity with capitalism and an anti-British continentalism — misread the rise of the modern welfare state. Inspired by new liberal thinking in Great Britain and the United States, thinking that stressed equality of participation, both political and economic rights and an activist role for the state, Shortt, Skelton, Clark and Mackintosh remained committed to "the promise of democratic politics and capitalist economics" (p. 233). Like many intellectuals of what Douglas Owram coined the government generation, these Queen's academics, foreseeing "a major role for the state as agent for the redistribution of economic and political rights", joined the expanding federal civil service (p. 237). In the end, Ferguson disagrees with Michiel Horn (*The League For Social Reconstruction: The Intellectual Origins of the Democratic Left in Canada*) and R. Douglas Francis (*Frank H. Underhill: Intellectual Provocateur*) who locate the origins of the welfare state in the social democratic movement of the 1930s and 1940s.[26] Likewise, he finds the analysis offered by Douglas Owram (*The Government Generation: Canadian Intellectuals and The State, 1900-1945*) and James Struthers (*No Fault of Their Own: Unemployment and the Canadian Welfare State, 1914-1941*) equally unsatisfying.[27] For him, the welfare state of the post-war years was not simply an exercise in economic efficiency but rather a liberal-democratic commitment to economic and social justice. "The new liberalism", concludes Ferguson,

> was an argument for the provision of equal conditions for all men and women and the extension of the measure of well-being to include the totality of social,

26 See Michiel Horn, *The League For Social Reconstruction: The Intellectual Origins of the Democratic Left in Canada* (Toronto, 1980); R. Douglas Francis, *Frank H. Underhill: Intellectual Provocateur* (Toronto, 1986).

27 See Douglas Owram, *The Government Generation: Canadian Intellectuals and The State, 1900-1945* (Toronto, 1986); James Struthers, *No Fault of Their Own: Unemployment and the Canadian Welfare State, 1914-1941* (Toronto, 1983).

economic, and political life. The argument lies at the heart of the scholarly work of Shortt, Skelton, Clark, and Mackintosh. It also is their legacy to Canadian intellectual life (p. 246).

Ferguson adopts a very traditional approach. *Remaking Liberalism* contains no references to Foucault, Gramsci, Said or Geertz. Rather, Ferguson takes inspiration from works on turn-of-the-century liberalism in American and British historiography. Similarly, he eschews the history of political discourse for the history of political thought; and, in order to explicate that political thought, he studies, like Vipond, "those individuals most prominent in the debate".[28] Ferguson's primary sources include neither bars of soap nor imagined geographies but consist entirely of university records, personal papers and published works. The relationship between theory and empirical evidence must be circular and ongoing, each continuously informing the other.[29] Unless this dialectic is respected, theory, in the end, plays too determinative a role. Interested in what actually happened and uninterested in history as political engagement, *Remaking Liberalism* is one of the better new volumes in English-Canadian intellectual history to appear in recent years.

After the dismissal of ideas as epiphenominal to demographic and economic forces, the most common charge levelled against intellectual history is that of representation: can, as in the case of *Remaking Liberalism,* four white, male, privileged intellectuals be seen as representative of an age? The answer is no, of course not. Yet the history of political thought, as opposed to the history of discourse and *l'histoire des mentalités,* tends to focus on elites. Such is the inherent bias of the primary sources used by the historian of political thought. However, Ferguson never claims that Shortt, Skelton, Clark and Mackintosh represent anything like an age, or the spirit of the times, or the national collective conscience. Moreover, the problem of representativeness is not unique to intellectual history. Douglas Owram makes exactly this point when he writes, "All historians have been capable of building castles in the air and the reality of history can just as easily fade away behind numerical tables as behind symbols and myths".[30]

If, as Clarence Karr has noted, "the group biographical approach"[31] has dominated the writing of intellectual history in English Canada then the biography of a single intellectual has not been far behind. Accordingly, the final two volumes under review, William Christian's *George Grant: A Biography* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1993) and Donald Horton's *André Laurendeau: French-Canadian Nationalist, 1912-1968* (Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1992), are both

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28   Karr, "What Happened to Canadian Intellectual History?", p. 160.

29   For a very skilled handling of Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony by an historian see Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal and Kingston, 1994).

30   Owram, "Writing About Ideas", p. 65.

31   Karr, "What Happened to Canadian Intellectual History?", p. 167.

biographies.32

On the one hand, biography magnifies the problems of representativeness associated with the group biography approach: a single intellectual might be interpreted as the source and cause of something as sweeping as English-Canadian conservatism or French-Canadian nationalism. On the other hand, biography improves on the group biography approach: it makes possible the exploration of the enormous complexity of human beings and the contradictions of human thought at the same time as it avoids the false uniformity imposed on the subjects of group biography, where, for example, individuals lose their multiplicity in the light of a single theme, argument or school of thought. That is, because biography can measure change over time, the young anti-semite of Esther Delisle's *The Traitor and the Jew*33 becomes an evolving, maturing human being in Horton's *André Laurendeau*. Furthermore, as William Christian argues, "By examining one life in a biography we affirm implicitly that what each individual does here and now matters absolutely, and we therefore attest to the centrality of individual moral responsibility" (p. xxi).

To these ends, both Christian and Horton have written excellent studies that at once reveal the infinite subtleties and complexities of human beings and capture the dialectic between self and society. In reading about George Grant the person, his childhood, his familial connections, his experience in London during the war and his personal, intellectual odyssey as a Christian and as a philosopher, we also read about English-Canadian conservatism, British-Canadian nationalism, English-Canadian perceptions of American imperialism and the tension between tradition and modernity. Similarly, Horton presents a private and a public André Laurendeau. The private Laurendeau secretly renounced Catholicism, enjoyed a mistress and suffered horrific bouts of self-doubt and guilt. The public Laurendeau, meanwhile, began his career with the separatist (and anti-semitic) youth movement, *Jeune-Canada;* he then went on to fight with the "no" side in the April 1942 plebiscite on conscription and soon afterwards became leader of the provincial party, the Bloc Populaire; following his resignation he joined *Le Devoir* and eventually became editor-in-chief. However, he remains best known to English-Canadians as co-chair of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism. Precisely because Laurendeau was both a witness to and influential participant in 20th-century Quebec history, his biography is "a revealing study of how French Canadians, in Quebec especially, experienced the difficult transition from a traditional to a modern society" (p. 2).

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32 For fascinating insight into the popularity of biography, see Steven Birkerts, "Losing Ourselves in Biography", *Harper's Magazine* (March 1995), pp. 24-6.

33 See Esther Delisle, *The Traitor and the Jew: Anti-Semitism and the delirium of extremist right-wing nationalism in French Canada from 1929-1939* (Montreal, 1993).

Although they approach the writing of intellectual history as either discourse analysis, the history of political thought or biography, these six authors all share a common animating conviction: ideas matter. From Mariana Valverde to William Christian, all are right to insist on the irreducibility of ideas, thought, the inventiveness of the human mind. "Mental life is more than a pale reflection of some more basic developments in material life".[34]

DONALD WRIGHT

34 Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony", p. 570.