

The Centre Does Not Hold: A Review Essay of Canadian History: A Reader's Guide

A. W. Rasporich

Volume 36, 1995

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/11t36re01>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Rasporich, A. W. (1995). Compte rendu de [The Centre Does Not Hold: A Review Essay of Canadian History: A Reader's Guide]. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 36, 299-307.

REVIEW ESSAYS / NOTES CRITIQUES

The Centre Does Not Hold: A Review Essay of *Canadian History: A Reader's Guide*

A.W. Rasporich

M. Brook Taylor, *Canadian History: A Reader's Guide. 1. Beginnings to Confederation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1994).

Doug Owsram, *Canadian History: A Reader's Guide. 2. Confederation to the Present* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1994).

THESE VOLUMES REPRESENT the third generation of Guides to Canadian History published by the University of Toronto Press, and the fourth or fifth if one includes earlier versions published by Hakkert in the 1970s. One looks almost nostalgically at the earlier prices in comparison with four and fivefold increases to this present-day version of the historical canon. Admittedly the current volumes are twice the size of the originals at four or five hundred pages each, reflecting the vast increase of scholarship in Canadian history over the past two to three decades. Ably abetted by the irrigation provided by granting agencies, the learned journals such as this one and others devoted to various aspects of Canadian social, economic, and regional history, have caused the desert to bloom. In fact, one of the authors notes in the section on the Canadian West that J.M.S. Careless complained there has been so much regional history written that he feels like "a farmer in a flood: 'Lord, I

A.W. Rasporich, "The Centre Does Not Hold: A Review Essay of *Canadian History: A Reader's Guide*," *Labour/Le Travail*, 36 (Fall 1995), 299-307.

know I prayed for rain, but this is ridiculous.” But, it is also likely that the current contraction in both granting agencies and funding for post-secondary education will mark the recent past as the high water mark, or even Golden Age, of Canadian historiography when examined in retrospect.

The editors begin with a bold presumption on their covers proclaiming the books as “An authoritative guide to Canadian historical writing — what is good and why?” and an even bolder dedication in volume one which covers the pre-Confederation period — “To our students.”

As assumptions go, these assertions only partially deliver. This is most certainly an historian’s guide, as there is much beef here for scholars to chew on. Many historians will scurry to the indexes to see if their publications and those of their respected peers have made it into the new version of the canon, and will not likely be disappointed. The editors and authors have with few exceptions done an admirable job on their chosen subjects, opting for inclusivity over exclusivity by casting their bibliographical net widely, whether regional or thematic in nature. Certainly the aspiring professional historian among the students will have here a *vade mecum* to the current state of the craft in these citation-laden articles, but will the history major or general student be an appropriate target audience? The likely verdict paralleling comment on the earlier versions of these volumes, will be that they are considered by students to be useful from a bibliographic perspective, but limited in their capacity to identify or inform the non-specialist of clear interpretive trends in Canadian historical writing.

These and other reservations are suggested in two caveat articles suggested to the reader in vol. 2 (xii) by the editor, Doug Owram, who notes the disclaimers against specialization and fragmentation of the discipline as a whole by J.M.S. Careless and J.M. Bliss. These reservations should give pause for reflection since Creighton and Careless’ fine biographies of John A. Macdonald and George Brown drew not only a generation into the discipline in the late 1950s but also attracted a wider reading public, and Bliss’ scientific and literary forays into Canadian medical history with the insulin and smallpox stories confirmed the craft was alive and well among historians and lay reading public in the 1980s. Now we are being told in the 1990s that we have strayed off-course, the centre was not holding, and that we were, in Bliss’ words, “Privatizing the Mind” and “Sundering ... Canadian History.” According to the canons of national history prescribed from the centre, we had, like Mae West’s Snow White, “drifted” from our pristine nationalist vocation. Where now are the national issues, and the national historians like Creighton, Lower, and Morton to keep alive the metier of public historians? (I note, ironically, that Hilda Neatby and her crusade against progressive education in the 1950s, *So Little for the Mind*, and the Marxist historian Stanley Ryerson’s heretical version of the historical canon are not usually mentioned in this arcadian lament.) But, by implication, there were still some of that noble breed, largely in Toronto, still left to defend the faith from the historical epicentre. The centralists’ difficulty paral-

leled that of the United States, where David Novick painstakingly demonstrated this historical devolution in his chapter on the decentralization and deconstruction of American historiography from the 1960s forward.¹

But one must ask, did we ever have a mythic centre? Did we not hear Donald Creighton's enduring lament against "the Authorized Version" of Canadian history from the whig, liberal, and Liberal perspective? Was it not W.L. Morton who in 1946 lambasted the Laurentian school of Canadian history and complained of the status of the poor western Canadian as a reincarnation of the poor medieval Scot catching crumbs from the central Canadian table? And did I not hear, when as an undergraduate at Queen's University in 1958, Arthur Lower say of Creighton (not mentioning him by name, but as the author of that rival and inferior text, *The Empire of the North*), that surely anyone who had to use that many adjectives really was not much of a historian! Or had I not read Michel Brunet passionately state Québec's nationalist position in the 1960s, or heard W.L. Morton speak unequivocally of the need to crush militarily any civil disobedience of the FLQ variety of separatism in 1964? In short, it seems that this country was and is all about diversity, and that passionate disagreement about varying regional, class, and ideological agendas has always been a part of its intellectual fabric. That is the essential point that Carl Berger makes in the last chapter of his classic historiographic study, when he wrote of the 1960s that, "The upsurge of publications in regional and provincial history represented the extension of a pre-existing tendency rather than an abrupt departure from the tradition of Canadian historical writing."²

Berger also noted in his fine analysis of the "new" history in the last chapter of his revised historiography, that after the mid-sixties, the transformation of historical writing reflected "a sea change" in the country's educational and intellectual life. Among its indicators were a boom in higher educational institutions and a rapid expansion of the graduate school, resulting in a quadrupling of graduate theses in history over the decade 1966-76, and an invigoration of the discipline by "people of more varied ethnic and cultural backgrounds, with a diversity of experiences, perspectives, and attainments."³ The new history would be as diverse as Canada itself and reflect more faithfully its class composition, its gender, its ethnicity, and its varied ideological and regional perspectives. I directly experienced that need for personal, emotional validation in history when I arrived at the University of Calgary in 1966, and assigned several essay topics on a variety of subjects, one of them on Louis Riel. Defying all laws of distribution and resources I received an over three-quarters return on the West's first political martyr. Never were George Stanley's works summarized and paraphrased so often by so many! Those were the same undergraduates whom W.L. Morton graphically described

¹David Novick, "The Center Does Not Hold," *That Noble Dream: The Objectivity Question and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge 1988), 522-75.

²Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History* (Toronto 1976), 222.

³Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History* (Toronto 1986), 262.

with some alarm in the late 1960s as wanting to "feel" history, rather than think critically about the past. And in some cases, these undergraduates also became the graduate students and professional historians who wove themselves and their stories, whether familial, class, political, or ethnic into the rich tapestry of the Canadian experience in the 1970s and 1980s.

We have in the process created a whole host of subdisciplines, as Carl Berger has so eloquently written of English Canada and Serge Gagnon has of French Canada. They have now self-described themselves in various thematic collections of historiographical essays such as John Schultz's *Writing About Canada*, Terry Crowley's *Clio's Craft*, and monographs such as Brook Taylor's *Promoters and Partisans*, Donald Smith's *Le Sauvage* and Daniel Francis' *Image of the Indian*, to name a few. Add to these, many reflective essays on the regions of Canada in such journals as *Acadiensis*, which not only features retrospectives on the Atlantic region, but on every aspect of Canadian historiography. Similarly, the western Canadian perspective has been described in introspective essays from its various conference proceedings dating from 1969-84, notably the comparative Maritime and Western conference. In fact, every major regional and national journal devoted to the newer history, such as *Labour/Le Travail*, *The Urban History Review*, *Canadian Ethnic Studies/Etudes Ethniques au Canada*, *Atlantis*, *Canadian Women's Studies*, *The Canadian Historical Review*, *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, *Revue d'histoire de L'Amérique française*, and nearly all of the provincial history journals have featured essays which reflect on this evolution of their historical consciousness.

It is in this collective sense of self-introspection that these two readers deliver a summation of an extraordinary modern enterprise, the historical writing of the past generation. The historical record has been doubled and redoubled, as entire shelves of libraries have been filled by the new scholarship. On the national macro/scale we are now up to the thirteenth volume of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography/Dictionnaire Biographique du Canada*, abundantly cited in these volumes, particularly the pre-Confederation text which is covered by the first ten volumes of the *DCB*. Three volumes of the *Canadian Historical Atlas* are also now before us. And, the centennial history of Canada, begun in 1962 is now completed to nineteen volumes, a monument as Ramsay Cook has noted to its original editors, Donald Creighton and W.L. Morton, and to its publisher Jack McClelland. On the less well-known micro-scale, Donald Akenson's fine collection of *Papers in Rural History* is already up to ten volumes and growing. Military history flourishes as never before, with the third volume of the RCAF history published and regimental histories marching forward on all fronts. By any measure, the achievements have been formidable, and testimony to the collective enterprise of Canadians summed up in Frank Underhill's acute observation and imprecation of Canadians "working together" in a common enterprise.

Canadian scholars have in fact always done well at such collective approaches to their history, beginning with the series, *Canada and its Provinces* and *The Makers of Canada* earlier in the century, but extending into other ambitious series such as the *Frontiers of Settlement* in the 1930s, the multi-volume *Canadian-American Relations* series sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation, and later, *The Social Credit* series which spanned the 1940s to the 1960s. The great classics of historical writing in Canada referred to in these two volumes were often written under the umbrella of some funded collective enterprise. Innis' *Fur Trade*, Creighton's *Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence*, Lower's *North American Assault on the Canadian Forest*, Morton's *Progressive Party*, and C.B. Macpherson's *Democracy in Alberta*, were all produced under the umbrella of funded research in a multidisciplinary series which spanned political economy, history, geography, sociology, and law to name a few. This collective tradition continued through to the modern period under examination here with learned journals and conference proceedings funded by Canada Council, SSHRC, and a whole host of government departments, notably Secretary of State, External Affairs and others. Add to these joint ventures with publishing houses, which produced *The Generations Series* published by McClelland and Stewart and the Secretary of State (eds., J. Burnet and H. Palmer) or the *History of Canadian Cities* (ed., A. Artibise) with the National Museums of Canada and James Lorimer. Without such cooperative enterprises or joint ventures our historical landscape would be much more bleak and barren.

For the purposes of this journal, perhaps the most compelling area of focus comes in that elusive entity, "the common people." They were perhaps first described for us rather obliquely, but nicely, by Fred Landon in his classic centenary article on the Rebellions of 1837-38 as, "Those who farmed and worked at trades or kept shop; those who attended horse races or wrestling matches as well as those who attended revival meetings; those who came from the United States as well as those from the British Isles; the stage-driver, the inn-keeper, the doctor, the missionary, the postmaster, the editor of the local paper; the Anglican, the Methodist, Presbyterian, or Quaker; the people of whom Abraham Lincoln said that God must have loved them because he made so many of them."⁴ Since this was written in 1937, much has been said in print about "the common people," in British historiography notably by E.P. Thompson, Peter Laslett, Eric Hobsbawm, Richard Cobb, and others, in the United States by Eugene Genovese, Moses Rischin, Peter Gay, *et al.* and in France by the annalists, Bloch, Braudel, and Ladurie, and more recently by Michel Foucault, the post-structuralists and post-modernists. The devolution of history from patrician to plebeian, from elite to mass culture, from elite to popular culture, from patriarchal to matriarchal concerns, from conquerors to conquered, from colonizers to aboriginal peoples, from ordered national themes

⁴Fred Landon, "The Common Man in the Era of the Rebellion in Upper Canada," *CHA Annual Report* (1937), 76.

and chronology to more disjunctured local and regional subjects has been profound. But it has also made our history more complex as it deepens, layer upon layer, and sub-theme upon subplot, until we enter into the sort of detailed learned discourse which might be in danger of obliterating the original subject of our enquiry — the common people of Landon's early definition.

These two volumes are in some respects very different, the pre-Confederation by Brook Taylor longer by about a hundred pages than the post-Confederation one edited by Doug Owram. Upon closer examination, one finds that the essays in volume one are more traditional in that they generally integrate better the pre-1960 historiography into their literature review of the field. The post-Confederation essays tend on the whole to concentrate more upon the new fields of history, such as working class, women, urban, business, native, and intellectual themes, blending them into a mix of regional and provincial history. The pre-Confederation volume on the other hand is a more traditional mix of subjects such as Atlantic, Pacific, Northwest, and central Canadian regions, with two chronological examinations of the pre-1760 period from the viewpoint of exploration and discovery, with an endpiece on the colonial-imperial context by J.M. Bumsted. Both the periodization and the thematic divisions of history are both predictable and faithful to the historiographical conventions which have developed in such self-defining collective ventures as the *Canadian Centenary Series* and the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*.

Conversely, the traditional territorial division of historiographical subjects in volume one is as much a limitation as a strength, for the largely thematic divisions in the post-Confederation volume result in more impressionistic sketches which cut across regions and provinces. The latter essays, despite a tendency to overlap and repetition (see, for example, women's suffrage, where Cleverdon and Bacchi's single titles are mentioned four times), address the new social histories of women, workers, and native peoples in addition to cultural, intellectual, and business history. One might quibble about the weighting given to each, but the groupings themselves force each of the authors to concise summaries of the main themes in recent historiography.

Given such divisions of labour, however, important themes have been lightly treated, for example, ethnicity, which is only superficially touched upon the area studies, less than a page each on ethnicity in Québec and the Maritimes, two to three on Ontario and the West and North. Given the lack of a theme essay on the subject, major works like Frank Epp's two-volume history of the Mennonites (and a third in the works by Ted Regehr), or Manoly Lupul's work on the Ukrainians are omitted. Or, one might lament the lack of recent studies on the Jews in English-speaking Canada, like Louis Rosenberg's republished work, Gerald Tulchinsky's recent works or those of Henry Trachtenburg. Most noticeable is the lack of any mention of David Lewis' autobiography or the place of the Lewis family in the history of the CCF/NDP. The history of ethnicity in modern Canada thus appears

as a subset of labour, urban, and women's history, and while it does surface in a paragraph or page or two of each of those articles, it does so with distinct limitations of perspective in each. The preference would have been for a discrete essay like that by J.R. Miller for Canada's native peoples, or even a more extensive essay which incorporated both ethnicity and native peoples in a single treatment of the cultural history of minorities in the Canadian experience. Such a treatment of pluralism in the Canadian social experience would have been useful, and at the very least readers might have been guided to W.L. Morton's fine essay on that subject in *Canadian Ethnic Studies* (1981).

By contrast, it appears that the pre-Confederation volume on pre-industrial Canada captures more of the pluralistic makeup of Canada's diversity. The essays on Canada's beginnings, the *pays en haut*, on Acadia and on Nova Scotia thoroughly detail the contract and conflict with Canada's Amerindian populations, the French and Acadians, and the diverse strands of Scots, Irish, and Welsh settlements in pre-1800 British North America. Nowhere is that ethnic diversity more compellingly dealt with than in J.M. Bumsted's fine section on the imperial and international context of English, Irish, Scots, Welsh, and American Loyalist emigration/immigration, with passing reference to German and Jewish immigration. (428-39) Olaf Uwe Janzen's essay on Newfoundland also catches some of this diversity as well in his section on "the European Settling of Newfoundland" as does Kerry Abel on the West and Tino Loo on the Pacific Coast, the latter moreso in the context of native peoples and the métis. Both the essays by James Lambert on Québec and Bryan Palmer on Upper Canada catch some of the complexity of early British settler culture, particularly of the Irish immigration of the early 19th century. But the particular place of German, Mennonite, and Dutch settlers, and for that matter the Quakers, in the rural social fabric of old Ontario appears to have been omitted, although the role of the Blacks, particularly the slave refugees, is judiciously recorded. Lastly, the place of ethnic groups in the Maritime colonies is fully discussed by Ian Ross Robertson, who includes a wide-ranging list of works on aboriginal, Loyalist, English, Irish, Scots, Black, and Acadian populations in pre-Confederation Atlantic Canada. In sum, the authors have done well to offer a more complex version of a history that had been exclusively preoccupied with institutional history and the origins of the Canadian state.

Seen from another perspective of London's "common man," this collection admirably addresses the working people's culture, particularly in the essays by Bryan Palmer on Upper Canada in volume one, and Craig Heron on working-class history in volume two, plus solid subsections of the area studies by Andrée Lévesque on Québec, David Mills on Ontario, T.W. Acheson on the Maritimes, and John Thompson on the West and North. Also, Heron's essay addresses the issue of working-class culture in industrial Canada with an excellent summary of the rapidly emerging area of culture, leisure, and sports in the section on "neighbourhood and community." (94-8) Again, the only quibble one can raise is that he

misses work on the conjuncture of ethnicity and working-class leisure, in particular the recent works on the Nordic leisure pursuits of Finns and Scandinavians in Ontario and the West by Jorgen Dahlie, Jim Tester and Bruce Kidd to name a few. There are precious few citations of works on carnivals and fairs despite an abundance of these, for example, in the numerous works by Gray and MacEwan on the Calgary Stampede, Breen on the Pacific National Exhibition, and other more recent popular works such as Pierre Berton's *Niagara*. Similarly, popular religion, while an acknowledged part of the Québec historiography, seems to be lacking an English-Canadian counterpart beyond a study of drink and prohibition as a measure of social control. While the role of church and chapel are acknowledged in other essays, particularly that by Owsen on cultural and intellectual history, there is relatively little of the Thompsonian variety of synthesis which weaves the complex strands of religious practice, particularly Methodism, into working-class life. Some address of this gap occurs in the essays by Palmer on regulation and social control in volume one, and in volume two by Mills on the role of religion in Ontario's historiography, and by Mitchinson on the role of religion in the lives of women. Nowhere is this more evident than in several titles of the *Canadian Social History Series*, in particular the classic study of the sisterhood by Marta Danylewycz in *Taking the Veil: An Alternative to Marriage, Motherhood and Spinsterhood in Québec, 1840-1920*. (1987)

The new social history of the common people is celebrated throughout the pages of these volumes, with widespread citations of works on family, gender relations, sexuality, education, daily life, sickness, and health. We now understand much better the role of fire, flood, and disaster in the ordinary lives of Canadians with recent books and articles on the Halifax explosion, the St. John's conflagration, the P.F.R.A. and the Dryland disaster, than we ever knew before (although J.M. Bumsted's article on the Winnipeg Flood is curiously omitted). Similarly, the role of epidemics from cholera to smallpox and the Spanish flu are better understood as are the role of public health measures adopted to prevent repetitions of the tuberculosis and polio epidemics, and the role of Canadians in developing drugs and therapies such as insulin and the polio vaccine. We are coming to understand much better the complexities of gender relations and the rhythms of family life, violence, and repression, the latter in particular with relation to the history of native peoples. And we know a great deal more about the violent history of a non-violent people as anticipated in earlier historiographical challenges thrown out in the 1960s and 1970s by S.R. Mealing and Kenneth McNaught. From labour violence to religious and race riots and the activities of far right groups, down to plain down-home hockey riots and sporting debacles, we know what we knew instinctively and did not say, that the "peaceable kingdom" is one of the great Canadian myths, a whiggish fiction designed for the cosmopolitan world outside, and for social control within.

We have therefore come "to know ourselves" much better, as Tom Symons put it in his challenge to Canadians by now some two decades old. And according to some, like Michael Bliss and J.M.S. Careless, we know far more perhaps than we ever needed to know. But it is perhaps the discovery of all the underside and commonplace in our social and national character that is disturbing here: Karen Dubinsky's study of violence against women, Angus McLaren's work on sexual sterilization, and Cheryl Krasnick Warsh's book on the Homewood Retreat, and Barbara Roberts study of the deportations from Canada, *From Whence They Came*, to name but a few of the recent citations in social history. By opening up those letters in the attic, those hospital and asylum records and deportation files, the heroism commonly attributed to a single gender, class, and relatively homogenous ethnicity of two founding peoples has been irretrievably shattered in the deconstruction of the national myths. The reconstruction and recombination of the parts is by general agreement the relatively disordered state that we are at, since various of the authors of these essays often exhort upon the need for the great works of synthesis which must come. We are indeed at that Nietzschean point where we have, instead of shoring up out tottering historical myths, given them a push instead. We have perhaps also acknowledged what the historians of antiquity or the distant past always knew, the difficulties of historical reconstruction of even the recent past and the retrieval of what Peter Laslett has called "The World We Have Lost." The historical world that we are in the process of rediscovering and remaking may only be a century or two old, but we are discovering by exhaustive delayering and painstaking restoration, a much deeper and richer mosaic than could have been imagined a generation ago.