

Review Article

History for '67

In 1967 our Canadian Clio will stand on the summit of her Parnassus, the end of a long upward trail that began ten years ago when the challenges of the Centennial celebrations began to impinge upon her conscience. She will emerge from the dusty ascent as a rather tattered muse, for the way has been long and hard. She may seem forlorn, for she will not be certain that her voice has been heard. Dissident clamours of profane tongues have distorted her message. The simplicity and sweetness of her song have not been received with universal applause. Shrill and Beatle-like concatenations of contemporary protest have made discord in her time of anticipated elation and achievement.

Clio always believed that a nation was made in 1867, that, in the words of Walter Bagehot and Carlton J. H. Hayes, there was a body of common memories, convictions, aspirations binding a people together in an orderly passage to unity and progress. Yet the idea of a nation and the fact of nationality, her theme song, have seemed strangely repellent on the threshold of Canada's 100th birthday. Clio might be excused were she to compose a funeral dirge in place of her anthem of triumph.

Perhaps history has moved too swiftly, even for Clio. In moments of pessimism she sighs upon and regrets the cult of permissiveness that appears to hold the people of Canada in thrall, tolerating and applauding all repudiation of the past and its achievements. Queen Victoria is dead, the argument runs, and so should be the works of Queen Victoria's reign. A generation of young Canadians who have not been called upon to face a crisis of survival, the first in this century, cultivate revolutionary attitudes against the minor imperfections of a fortunate and affluent society. The spectre of two nations has been raised. Economists declaim against the eccentricities and strains of the national economy with such persistence that the maintenance of the nation becomes a bagatelle in their reckoning, taking a very poor second place to their ant-like preoccupation with the raising of living

standards. Separatism lurks on the fringes of French-Canadian thought. The neighbouring greatest nation the world has ever seen is forced upon a career of self-righteous adventure and imperialism. But when Mr. Walter Gordon or any one else utters a breath of national sentiment there are English-Canadian scholars who decry his barbarism and call him antiquated. The University world is enveloped by learned young social scientists, trained to speculate upon possibilities but to evade the dynamism of the *status quo*. Their discourse is loaded with fatalism and the doctrine of inevitability. Their leading habits of thought are the recognition of prevailing trends and a capacity to surrender to them. Nearly always they are gloomy, and the impending dissolution of Canada is their familiar theme.

Canadians may seem woefully uninspired by memories of the past. Yet Clio has piped bravely and has gathered a following that is gratifying both in its numbers and in its enthusiasms. As the nation has come of age its history has acquired a new cosmology, something more than a digression from the story of imperial Britain or of continental America. In most of the history curricula of the universities, Canadian history has acquired a central position. The historians have contributed ponderously to the libraries of the book-buying public. The near miracle has been that publishers have been willing to hazard so much on the alleged dullness of Canadian history and on the appetite of the public for it. In making this boast it must be admitted that, as in many other successful Canadian enterprises, the results have been achieved by a judicious combination of public subvention and private enterprise.

Clio's disciples are a motley group. There are the pots-and-pans historians who revel in the details of domestic life in times more primitive, speculating upon the probability of tea once having been served as soup. There are the addicts of what, for want of a better term, is often called human interest, those who scorn the skills of constitution-making and turn, for the fare that intrigues them, to the bundling romance and courtship of the eighteenth century. There is the journalistic breed who select the bizarre and the picturesque at the expense of the significant. Always there are the simplifiers who see a conflict between good and evil. There are the local historians who revere their own *lares* and *penates*. In searching for a *zeitgeist*, Canadians are happier amid the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries than amid the political and constructive processes that made the nation. The grace and utility of the birch-bark canoe arouse much greater enthusiasm than the clever compromises of the Fathers of Confederation. If there is one thing upon which we can agree it is in our admiration for the noble red man whom we have so ruthlessly degraded. Our artists have led in the elemental quest for national self-expression by seeking inspiration in howling wildernesses. Our craftsmen emulate the culture of the Eskimo.

Yet for 1967 the theme is one of statecraft, of the involved and unspectacular

blue-prints and conspiracies, contingencies and coincidences, by which Canada was projected into being. Almost any other nation can provide the stage and setting that will provoke even the ordinary historian to lyricism and abandon. The field of battle, the smoke and terror of bloody revolution, can inspire the most pedestrian of all to rhapsody in prose. Canada substitutes the conference table. But Canada is fortunate in an historian who has made from the tortuous negotiations of 1864-67 a narrative of shocks and alarms, an episodic series of events that ring with drama.* *The Road to Confederation* is a story replete with tensions, the tension of near disaster and ultimate triumph, the odyssey of a mental strife that finally won through against a host of adverse elements in the parochial politics of the colonies and in the international climate as well.

Donald Creighton is an historian who observes all the canons of scholarly orthodoxy. He works from archival materials, and his books are liberally besprinkled with the little numerals that betoken documentary reference, the sort of thing the lay reader and reviewer sometimes find mildly terrifying. For authenticity is the first test of the reputable historian. But it is his literary quality that raises him from the ranks of the merely reputable to that of a popular spokesman for Canadian nationality. Either from a superior talent or from a capacity for working harder than the rest, he strikes sparks from the homeliest and most commonplace of documentation. A bell-like quality of percussion in his prose brings music to his sequence and makes easier an understanding of the complicated events he describes. Much less than other breeds of men can scholars endure comparison. But, if English Canada has a national historian, it is the author of *The Road to Confederation*. To find a menial but convincing justification for such a great claim one can turn to the lowest common denominator, the evidence of his box-office appeal. He successfully reaches out beyond the universities to what might be called the semi-popular market, that of the intelligent and educated reader. There might be enough evidence to suggest that he has manufactured a market of this kind for Canadian history.

Certainly Creighton is the historian who has most conspicuously adopted a national theme. His *Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence* is the tale of an east-west mercantile metropolitanism that survived the pressures and pull of south-north continentalism, giving to Canada the material wherewithal on which a nationality might flower. His biography of Sir John A. Macdonald, the first volume of which was published in 1952, is the more humane side of the same thesis, the successful struggle of a man of genius against the Fates, the implanting of the seed of nationality on sterile soil and its spread to the far Pacific. In the beginning there was

* *The Road to Confederation*. By Donald Creighton. Toronto: The Macmillan Company of Canada, 1964. Pp. 489. \$7.50.

unbelievably good luck, and success seemed assured. The end was punctuated by adversities, but the old man held on to most of what had been won, triumphant in principle but somewhat a loser in detail. There is little doubt that Creighton is a talented and articulate devotee of the Great Man theory of history. To him Canada was Macdonald and Macdonald was Canada.

The Road to Confederation is no better a book than the Macdonald biography, but this is still a very great compliment. Having achieved so much in what surely will be the great work of his lifetime, Creighton hazarded his reputation on what might have turned out to be a mere postscript to it. It would be preposterous to suppose that a totally new book should emerge. The great man thesis remains largely unchanged, but it is enriched and perhaps slightly moderated by additional knowledge that he gleaned over the thirteen-year span. By far the most important of the newly-found oases has been the papers of George Brown, Macdonald's great adversary and partner in the work of Confederation. Their discovery in Scotland was the work of J. M. S. Careless of the University of Toronto, a classic combination of historical science and plain detective work, and Brown's side of the story has been told in *Brown of the Globe*. Others, as well as Creighton, have benefited from this luxuriant addition to Canada's stock of historical source material. The industry and thoroughness of the historian are given ample testimony by the stray wisps of evidence he has gathered from other collections, principally in the British Isles. These highly illuminate the confidential negotiations, informal discussions on English weekends and strong persuasions to action adroitly brought about, that make up the story of the union of the provinces. There must be little, if any, secret history of Confederation remaining. What Creighton learned from the papers of Gladstone, Cardwell, and other leading English Whigs substantiates the pretty well established conviction that to them British North America was a liability somehow or other to be disposed of. From the perspective of the Maritime Provinces, cajoled or coerced into Confederation, this must appear as the principal factor that made union possible.

Great historians become prominent targets for lesser and ambitious people. As Creighton is the man who has drawn most applause, it follows that he should be favoured by the most criticism. Younger men who are new to the glory of the successful presentation of doctoral theses prefer to believe that his history has been too simply and too elegantly told to bear witness to the complete truth. Among them are some of his own students from the University of Toronto. As many have laboured for years on massive volumes of nineteenth-century minutiae, it is reasonable to suppose that each of them might persuade him to alter a sentence or half-sentence in one of his books. It is a truism among historians that all history must be corrected by more history.

Broadly, the criticism has been that Creighton is too much the humanist and not enough the social scientist. There is a general suspicion that literary stimuli overpower the historicity of Confederation, that literary tricks lighten up too brightly the sombre intricacies of the story. The diary of Mercy Coles of Charlottetown, the product of a very Victorian young lady, brings warmth and sunlight to the October rains and constitutional doldrums of Quebec. Can it truly be believed, the niggling plain man might ask, that the marriage of the mean-spirited and bigoted leader of the clear Grits, George Brown, effected such a wondrous change in his character that he was willing to enter a political marriage with Macdonald, the great contingency that brought union on its way? The brief extracts from George Brown's letters to his wife, judiciously employed by the historian, will probably persuade all good humanists that this was so, that the conjugal adventure of the ferocious editor of the *Globe* was one of the imponderable factors in the making of Canada. Who can deny that the nimble compromise of 1864 was favourably influenced by the happy circumstances of Brown's domesticity?

The humdrum critic will prefer to make allegations of extravagance rather than weakness against the author of *The Road to Confederation*. In this context there is a complaint illustrative of the kind of criticism to which the more literary historian exposes himself. Arthur Hamilton Gordon was a lieutenant-governor of New Brunswick who, though strongly in favour of the union of British North America, opposed the federal scheme unravelled at Quebec because it would perpetuate the corrupt and inefficient provincial establishment he found so distasteful at Fredericton. When the British Government discovered his unhelpful and rather petulant objections, he was promptly disciplined and conscripted as a member of the Confederation team. In consequence he twice interjected the royal prerogative into the confused pattern of New Brunswick politics, each time with spectacular results.

In the library of the University of New Brunswick the Stanmore Papers reveal the aspirations of a young man of thirty-five who was eager to give the right kind of advice to a backward people but who found himself in trouble with his employers for failing to approve the blue-print for Confederation from the very outset. Gordon was the son of Lord Aberdeen, a typical product of the whiggish society that believed in spreading its own wisdom, that of the latter-day Greeks, throughout the world. He was hypersensitive and religious. In the cathedral at Fredericton on Sunday mornings prayers were offered for the guidance of "Thy servant, Arthur." In any age he would be called a snob, and he was the product of an environment where snobbery was not merely tolerated but applauded.

The private letters of such an individual who became a principal in a complicated and fast-moving series of events offer superb opportunity for literary license. Every great drama requires at least a modicum of comic relief, and Creighton found

his clown in the Lieutenant-Governor of New Brunswick. Gordon serves for *The Road to Confederation* the role of Macbeth's porter who makes the audience laugh in the midst of murder most foul. He is the snivelling and contemptible go-between, recklessly inserting opinionated views at inappropriate times yet always desperately, pathetically, eager to keep on good terms with the Colonial Office which some day might reward him with a lush berth in the tropics. As Gordon murmurs upon the severities of the New Brunswick winter, Creighton perceives a whiner and complainer. His photograph shows a man with "long, narrow, melancholy countenance" and "a pair of watchful brooding eyes". But this is a good description of a great many photographs of mid-Victorian males. He is not a villain and is therefore not to be taken seriously—merely a nuisance or a well-intentioned fool.

From such an emphatic presentation of eccentricities satire comes easily. But something more than satire is worthy of the man who unhinged the deadlock of 1866 and made "the last chance" by which Confederation was consummated. Gordon was a careerist, but he took his career in his hands by forcing the resignation of the Smith government in April of that year. While the Colonial Office and Canada and the Confederates of Nova Scotia waited for a break in the deadlock, while the New Brunswick politicians continued to play politics and let Confederation wait, Government House at Fredericton produced the New Brunswick initiative that brought Confederation in sight. In the words of the Duke of Newcastle, there is only one justification for strong measures—success. This Gordon abundantly achieved. The noose was around the necks of the Anti-Confederates of New Brunswick, and Gordon sprang the trap. If union was a good thing, he deserves the applause denied him in *The Road to Confederation*. Creighton's description of a man who later served the British Government with distinction in half a dozen colonies is reminiscent of the way in which envious Grits have obscured the achievements of his own hero, Sir John A. Macdonald, burying the significance of a man in a recitation of his minor follies and occasional errors.

Another book for 1967 is W. L. Morton's *The Critical Years: The Union of British North America, 1857-1873*.^{*} Morton is easily the leading historian of the Canadian West, and his title will remind Easterners that Confederation was not confined to the four founding provinces. Always there were those alien pockets of British subjects, scattered over the limitless plains and in the shadow of the forbidding mountains, fiercely tenacious of local *amour propre*. That they were ultimately incorporated into Canada savours much more of the miraculous than does the prosaic business of 1864-67. For Morton the politics of the prairies are just as urgent as the perambulations to Charlottetown and Quebec. Perhaps the best point of

* *The Critical Years: The Union of British North America, 1857-1873*. By W. L. Morton. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964. Pp. 322. \$8.50.

vantage for the entire performance is Winnipeg. Novel and stimulating is his insistence on the importance of the Treaty of Washington. The Yankees gave us a bad bargain, but the conclusion of any kind of bargain at all was recognition of a new continental state. To a generation well schooled in the notion that the Yankees are slow to recognize this status it will probably appear more important than it did in 1871.

The two books complement one another magnificently. Abruptly and impetuously Creighton begins his account as late as 1863, dashing in headlong pursuit of his next episode in a chronicle of crises. Morton is far more deliberate in crossing the starting-line, taking careful stock of the field before he enters full chase. Creighton's people appear as prime movers, Morton's as instruments of ideas and movements to which people are subordinate. If Creighton is the humanist, Morton is the social scientist. Some may say that Creighton is idolatrous and whimsical about people, others that Morton is factual and too determined to leave nothing out. Both historians are nationalists, and a high sense of mission can be perceived in the approach they have taken. Careful and critical historians are often too iconoclastic. Amid the archival debris of debate and cross-purposes, of diplomatic subterfuge and constitutional fog, it is often easy to see the feet of clay, to forget that the Fathers of Confederation were idealists. But *a mari usque ad mare* was always a little over the horizon, and our historians, like the men they write about, always toil upward with their faces toward the light.

"Nationalism" and "nationalist" are words that require elaboration—at least in Canada. A homogeneous nationalism implies the suffocation of one smaller national group by the larger, and the emergence of another, late-model, North American melting-pot. In his excellent little book on the French-Canadian question, published this year, Ramsay Cook draws a careful distinction between nationalism and the nation-state. There is no sophistry here. For nation-state is a piece of terminology that can be used precisely to describe what the Fathers of Confederation were trying to do.

Can Canadians agree upon a meaning for the nation-state? Can they settle upon the exact dimensions and more subtle ramifications of the great experiment of 1867? Creighton and Morton have given us a meaning. But its basic premises face a fearsome challenge that for fifty years has been welling up from an increasing volume of French-Canadian historiography. Condemning what he considered to be the ruinous compromise of Cartier, Canon Groulx taught that the French race in North America has a destiny apart. Fortified by the great tradition of Charlemagne, St. Louis, and Joan of Arc, its historic duty is the continuation of the work of Fathers Brébeuf and Lalemant. The policies of Cartier were a slavish surrender of Anglo-Saxon design, a conspiracy that would deny any fulfilment of this great aspiration. Confederation was simply a continuation of the conquest.

Today, in the Institute of History at the University of Montreal, founded by Groulx, the idols of modern industrial society are substituted for the saints and martyrs of yore. Michel Brunet teaches that the calamity of French Canada was the loss of its progressive middle class following the conquest, that the progressive middle class must be regained and made supreme. French Canadians can win justice and quality only within the folds of contemporary commercialism—but no minority anywhere has ever been able to win justice and equality.

All of this reminds us of Danton's classic statement that the revolution was in men's minds twenty years before it was born. Among Canadian historians it is now commonplace to overhear the remark that the Institute of History at the University of Montreal is responsible for dualism, separatism, terrorism, and the whole spirit of high adventure that makes life in Quebec so exciting in our time. Behind Groulx's other-worldly approach to historical problems are contempt and distrust for Anglo-Saxondom. Brunet's prejudices are the same, but he clothes his history in more material and contemporary accoutrements. Probably both are image-makers. It is doubtful whether Dollard des Ormeaux, adopted by Groulx as a patron saint for French Canada, ever really existed. There are French-Canadian historians who deny that New France ever had a prosperous middle class. But the raffish students of yesteryear, today the intellectual leaders of Quebec, have preferred the literature of uplift and revolt. In very great contrast to our flaccid and relaxed English-Canadians, many Quebecois believe that History can be put to work. History can be employed to amend the injustices, or alleged injustices, of the past.

If the polity of the nation-state is to be preserved and if the history of Creighton or of Morton or of anybody else is to become nationally acceptable, historians of all prejudices must work more closely together. No serious historian ever presumed to believe that he can solve problems. But, for the intelligent and serious reading public he can make problems infinitely more comprehensible by careful and honest recording. Though anything but gratitude to the memory of Cartier appears to dominate French-Canadian opinion, he can remind French-Canadians that as a race they have survived in spite of Cartier's politics. He can remind all the young social scientists of Couchiching and elsewhere who offer prescriptions for the dissolution of the nation-state that Canada has survived, still towering over all their dreamy and ambitious speculations. If fissures have shown in the structure of the nation-state, historiography must bear a great deal of the responsibility but historians can still do a great deal to repair the damage.

A good example of the abuse and misuse of history is close to home. The exile of the Acadians was a minor episode in a hundred-year rivalry between English and French. Though the English won in the end, it could probably be shown that, over the total span of hostilities, they lost more lives, suffered greater losses of property, endured more misery and privation than did their opponents. The

first expulsion of the Acadians, that from Beaubassin in 1751, was the work of the Abbé de la Loutre in the interests of French military requirements. Long after the great expulsion of 1755, hundreds of remaining Acadians voluntarily exiled themselves, going off to the West Indies and to St. Pierre and Miquelon to bolster the reviving commerce of France. England exiled them in the midst of a bitter war. Long after the war was ended the Abbé de la Loutre, safe home in France and serving the Duc du Choiseul's ambitions for revenge, was endeavouring to make them an element in still another war.

Longfellow lyricized upon the affair of 1755 and emblazoned on the mind of the literary world an image of a tyrannical and brutal wrong. Unnumbered lesser men, both French-speaking and English-speaking, have taken up his refrain. The authors of school text-books and popular histories and many casual journalists and commentators rejoice in the opportunity to bring the racial passions of the eighteenth century into the twentieth. Poets, moralists, and propagandists have an immense advantage over sober historians who paint their pictures in shades of grey. The popular mind prefers black and white. It is not surprising that one can still hear of bitter speeches at local branches of the Assumption Society. English-speaking journalists, finding little else in a harmonious society to make our flesh creep, can see *la revanche du berceau* immediately ahead and strive to revive the smouldering Orange conscience. Evangeline was a winsome girl, but can we remember that she was not one of Clío's protégées, that certain other Muses, perhaps more attractive but less truthful than Clío, have proclaimed her griefs and indignations?

How many more legends, half-truths, and distortions of the truth foul up the historical seed-bed of our Canadian nation-state? This is one of the questions that will be answered, no doubt in a very official but perhaps uncertain way, by the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism. If the members and their numerous underlings do their job properly, historical wings will be clipped and historical plumage will go fluttering about the country. It will be interesting to discover whether or not a Royal Commission can perform a more honest and objective task than the body of Canadian professional historians. This may be possible in a few months—or perhaps years.

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