

The Mind and Character of Robert Borden

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Volume 6, numéro 1, autumn 1976

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad6_1rv02

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Éditeur(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Waite, P. B. (1976). Compte rendu de [The Mind and Character of Robert Borden]. *Acadiensis*, 6(1), 129–134.

couraged in its plans to begin the encoding of census and other manuscripts, while Statistics Canada should aid in this process and also open the 1881 and 1891 materials to researchers. Efforts like the C.H.A.'s and S.S.R.C.'s to standardize procedures and lobby with the federal government must be encouraged and supported fully by the profession. Finally, we must give consideration to ways of systematically training scholars and students in Canada, as well as sending them to foreign institutes. These recommendations mark only a bare beginning, but any steps in these directions would mark significant improvement and repay investments of time, energy, and funds. Canadian history deserves such a major effort.

HARVEY J. GRAFF

The Mind and Character of Robert Borden

MacGregor Dawson called his book on Mackenzie King a "political biography," and he meant it.¹ Dawson had found difficulty in using important and revealing sections of the King diaries. It was not from prudishness — Dawson was not a prude — but because he felt that it was too soon to use such evidence. King had died only seven years before. Dawson thus meant by the designation "political" that he could not write a full biography. The result was that Dawson's biography of King is almost too judicious; what Dawson believed he could use of the sources in effect determined what King was to be. The types of sources for Borden are different; but the problems revealed in Craig Brown's handsome biography are not dissimilar.² In this 306-page study of Borden's life from 1854 to 1914, the emphasis is placed on Borden's political career from 1896 to 1914. Unlike MacGregor Dawson, however, Craig Brown really does not have much choice. There is almost no private correspondence of Borden after 1905, and, judging by the thinness of the book on Borden's private life before that time, there are no great riches in the earlier period either. The records of Borden's (and Sir John Thompson's) law firm have disappeared. In other words, lack of evidence has limited the portrait of the man.

"The most significant lessons in life," said Borden to the Acadia graduating class of 1932, "are to be found in adversity. To agonize — that is to wrestle with oneself — in the intellectual and spiritual sense is an essential disci-

- 1 R. MacGregor Dawson, *William Lyon Mackenzie King: a political biography* (Toronto, 1958).
- 2 Robert Craig Brown, *Robert Laird Borden: a biography* (Toronto, Macmillan, 1975), vol. I, 1854 - 1914.

pline.”³ There spoke the Presbyterian, and, in a larger sense, the classical scholar. Borden read Greek and Latin all his life. “*Immerge, et jam tace*” appears many times in a diary for 1873, when he was teaching school in New Jersey.⁴ “Work and shut up” would be a rough translation. It was as much Stoic stiffening as Christian resignation. In later years, Borden’s legal reflexes reinforced this taciturnity. Thus Borden’s *Memoirs*, while by no means devoid of interest, are largely bereft of the vitality that frankness might have given them. Heath MacQuarrie, who re-edited them for the Carleton Library in 1969, is sure-footed enough when dealing with Borden’s political career, but seems puzzled by Borden’s mind and character, as well he might be.⁵ For this purpose one must consult not the *Memoirs*, but *Letters to Limbo*, letters that Borden, characteristically, addressed to the future. These letters, published by Borden’s nephew, Henry Borden, MacQuarrie probably never saw.⁶

Letters to Limbo were written between 1933 and Borden’s death in 1937. Borden put much more of himself and his thought in these than ever he did into print during his lifetime. For example, there is a remarkable contrast between the eulogy of Sir George Foster that Borden thought fit to publish in 1932, and a sharp estimate of Foster’s strengths and weaknesses written (but not published) a year later in 1933. Borden had just read W. S. Wallace’s *Memoirs of Sir George Foster*, issued by Macmillan that year. He found them “meagre”, and much too generous to Foster. Foster would always find, Borden wrote to posterity, “more excuses for himself than for his fellows He seemed absolutely incapable of judging his own actions by the same standards which he applied to those of other men.”⁷

In short, Borden comes to life in *Letters to Limbo*. There he is the scholar, the poet, the man of the study and of the woods. His sense of humour — something that everyone who knew him commented on — is sharp. The Prince of Wales (Edward VIII) was the source of one story Borden liked about the intellectual limitations of George V when compared to the transcendent capacity of Queen Mary: “George the Fifth, Mary the Four-Fifths.” Borden’s marvellous impatience with pretence comes through again and again. One reason he disliked Mackenzie King was King’s eternal preoccupation with precedence, role and appearances. That stuff was not for Bor-

3 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

4 Craig Brown quotes this in his *Borden*, p. 9, as “*Immerge, Etiam taci.*” My classical colleagues tell me it should be as I have quoted it. Either it is Borden’s Latin that is wrong, or there has been an error in transcription.

5 Henry Borden, ed., *Robert Laird Borden: his memoirs* (Toronto Macmillan, 1938), 2 vols; abridged edition, ed. Heath MacQuarrie (Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, 1969), 2 vols.

6 Robert Laird Borden, *Letters to Limbo*, ed. Henry Borden (Toronto, U. of T. Press, 1971).

7 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

den. When he was dying, in June, 1937, he said to his nephew: "Remember, Henry, none of this Sir 'stuff' at the cemetery, just plain 'Robert Laird Borden, born Grand Pré, N.S. — 1854; died Ottawa, Ontario — 1937'." Henry Borden also recalls his uncle's blistering remarks to Lloyd George in July, 1918, over the slaughter of the Canadian army at Passchendaele the previous autumn:

I do not remember the statement of Mr. Lloyd George [writes Henry Borden] which provoked my uncle's remarks but I have never forgotten his words, the pointed finger, his voice shaking with emotion: "Mr. Prime Minister, I want to tell you that, if ever there is a repetition of the battle of Passchendaele, not a Canadian soldier will leave the shores of Canada"

This is the true Borden, forceful, even passionate when need be, kind and unpretentious otherwise. It is nearly impossible not to like him, not to delight in the man who sleeps outside on summer nights to hear the birds, watch the dawn, or quote Tennyson *à propos* both.⁸

Borden was a scholar and he had the mind of a scholar. Besides Greek and Latin, he read French and German fluently. He was a man with a big intellectual range. He liked Goethe; it is refreshing to read his translation, done into his own verse, from *Wilhelm Meister* (Book 2, chapter 13):

Who never ate with tears his bread,
Who never through night's care-racked hours
Has wept in sadness by his bed,
He knows you not, ye Heavenly Powers.

It is possible even to enjoy Borden's hates, for he had a fine sense of discrimination about what and whom to hate. He hated Mitchell Hepburn. "In manners he is a boor in vindictiveness a savage, and in veracity, an Ananias. He boasts of economies, but his chief economy is of the truth." Borden believed it was a descent terrible to picture from the heights of Edward Blake and Oliver Mowat down to Mitchell Hepburn. Only Virgil could do justice to it. "*Facilis descensus Averni . . .*": easy it is to descend to Avernus (from *Aeneid* vi-126). In Borden's view, Hepburn was doing much more for the Conservative party of Ontario than the party was doing for itself. Perhaps the thirty-four years of Conservative rule that followed within nine months of Hepburn's fall in 1942, is evidence of Borden's prescient good sense.⁹

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 263, 19 - 20, vi, 9.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 154 - 5.

One thinks of Borden walking up Parliament Hill on a winter morning, meditating as he goes. He never hurried; he gave the impression of being a serious, reflective man. In interviews he talked rarely; he gave people the feeling that he had plenty of time. There was lots of time where his had come from. You would find it difficult to rattle him. He was in fact utterly unspicacious, looking for all the world, as Augustus Bridle once noted, like a man designed to be a church warden and who somewhere along the way had spectacularly missed his calling.¹⁰ Borden had never intended to go into politics. He had wanted to be a judge, as Sir John Thompson had been. Thompson asked him in 1887 to be his Deputy-Minister of Justice; and while it was a great plum for a young lawyer of 33 years of age, Borden did not take it, partly because he was not sure that such a post would lead to the Bench. So Borden stayed in Halifax. He developed a large law practice, bought four acres of land on Quinpool Road by the North West Arm, and built Pinehurst, a stone's throw from Sir Charles Tupper's place. In 1896, when Borden was 42, it was Sir Charles Tupper that persuaded him to run for Parliament.

These first 42 years of Borden's life take Craig Brown to p. 36 of Volume I. The next eight years take 221 pages. Is this a proper proportion? The answer lies in the question of available evidence. Doubtless a closer look at the court columns of Halifax papers at the time might have produced a few more shreds of evidence, but mainly it has to be said that there is little evidence on which to build additional pages for Borden's early life in Grand Pré or his lawyer's life in Halifax. However, there is a further problem, more elusive still: the Nova Scotianness of Robert Borden. Noticeable in the Annapolis Valley counties and in Colchester county is a costiveness, a dislike of saying too much, descended perhaps from Yankee or Yorkshire forbears, nourished in some indigenous condition. It is seen in several distinguished Nova Scotian politicians, A. W. McLelan of Colchester county, J. L. Ilsley of King's county, and Robert Stanfield of Colchester; it is a habit of weighing words before they are uttered, a trait particularly noticeable in this clutch of Nova Scotians, of whom Robert Borden is one. This quality of Borden is difficult to get hold of; one can only note its existence. The sense of the valley, the slow pace of its life, the rhythm of its seasons, Craig Brown has indeed essayed, as he has the distinctive character and charm of Halifax. Perhaps it is wrong to ask for more when the evidence seems not to exist, but one would have liked to have discerned the real roots of Borden's life in Grand Pré and Halifax, to see where that character, that strength — and those limitations — came from.

There were real limitations to Borden's very real capacity. He had not in him a scintilla of Laurier's marvellous ability to play the actor. Borden was

10 Augustus Bridle, *Sons of Canada: short studies of characteristic Canadians* (Toronto, 1916), p. 12.

largely devoid of a sense of theatre, that sense that Laurier had cultivated so beautifully. It is probably fair to say that Borden did not believe in political theatre. He came from plainer republican stock, wishing to understand and be understood, trusting in the basic good sense of the public to listen, to think, to decide, like the rational beings Borden believed they were. As Craig Brown puts it, *à propos* the Civil Service Commission,

The bland, unemotional words of Borden's electoral pledges conveyed the message that "extravagance" could be curbed simply by "a thorough reorganization of the method" of supervising public expenditure and that a "reformed" civil service would be both honest and efficient. These pledges were freighted with a host of assumptions about public morality and a rather naive faith in the efficacy of business-like administration.¹¹

Borden's weaknesses were part of this basic trust that justice and honour did in fact exist in most men, and that it only required the appropriate conditions to ensure that they flourished. Sam Hughes, who by March, 1911, had seen a good deal of Borden, wrote that Borden was "a most lovely fellow; very capable, but not a very good judge of men or tactics; and is as gentle hearted as a girl . . ."¹² Borden could not always think politically, as Laurier seemed invariably to do. Borden tried to grasp the essence of a problem, and then sought to make his political accommodation with it, if possible. Laurier tried to feel problems and get them politically right: Borden sought to understand them and get them morally right. The naval issue in 1910 is a good example of the difference.

Nowhere is Borden's political sense worse than in dealing with French Canadians. That was because it was the servant, not the master, of his moral judgment. That Annapolis valley judgment told him that education "should be left absolutely" to the control of provincial legislatures; the same judgment made him angry when he could not say a word "in defence of the constitution or the principle of national schools without at once being charged with fomenting religious discord and racial hatred . . ." But, he added philosophically, "the attitude of the French Canadians has always been a little peculiar in this respect."¹³ What Borden meant was that he opposed a double standard, *viz.*, the sanctity of provincial rights for Québec and the right of the federal government to override provincial rights in other provinces where the rights of French-speaking minorities were threatened. Borden did not seem to understand that for French-Canadians constitutional privileges and rights

11 Brown, *Robert Laird Borden*, pp. 211 - 12.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 183.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 101.

were not enough; as Craig Brown points out sensibly, “they had to use their political power to protect and defend them.” Borden had never known, and perhaps never would know, what it was like to be part of a linguistic minority passionately committed to preserving their language and their institutions. Borden read French literature, and probably spoke some French (I do not know how well); but that professorial, one might almost say Presbyterian mind of his did not translate French literature of the 19th century into French-Canadian politics of the 20th. Like Woodrow Wilson before the brilliance of Clemenceau, Borden was almost naive in dealing with the sometimes brilliant products of the *collèges classiques*, of *la civilisation française*, to say nothing of the Norman shrewdness of the ordinary French-Canadian voter.

All of this Craig Brown says with candour and honesty. His book is, indeed, a model of inductive history, written always with an eye to evidence, allowing the portrait of Borden to emerge almost by contrast, by sketching in the politics in which Borden moved, the world in which he lived, rather than, as Lytton Strachey would have done, setting out a clear and misleading portrait going from premise to deduction. Such a book as Craig Brown’s is difficult to do, and the rewards in its creation must be indirect; one wonders, indeed, whether Craig Brown’s enjoyment of Borden has survived such an exhausting test. One almost suspects not. But for the answer to this, one must await, with some impatience, his Volume II.

P. B. WAITE

The Art of the Memoir

The autobiography is the rational man’s solution to the question of life after death and for two thousand years the libraries of the civilized world have been stocked with memoirs providing a verbal extension of their authors’ presence into the afterworld. Yet the memoir, as opposed to the biography, has not been a favoured form of Canadian literary endeavour. The twentieth century has been particularly barren in this regard. Only two of our prime ministers, Tupper and Borden, wrote theirs, although Mackenzie King kept a wary and paternal eye on the efforts of his various eulogists. Around 1970, however, the dam of reticence broke, and the result has been a veritable flood of self-examination, self-justification and, less frequently, self-analysis. Since typically, if not essentially, the autobiography is a recognized form of special pleading, its author’s literary tombstone, it is no surprise to find that the books considered here usually cast a kindly eye on their respective heroes.

Lester Pearson’s autobiography, *Mike*, has appeared in regular install-