

Howard Robinson and the “British Method”: A Case Study of Britishness in Canada during the 1930s and 1940s

Don Nerbas

Volume 20, numéro 1, 2009

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/039785ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/039785ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association / La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)

1712-6274 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Nerbas, D. (2009). Howard Robinson and the “British Method”: A Case Study of Britishness in Canada during the 1930s and 1940s. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 20(1), 139–160. <https://doi.org/10.7202/039785ar>

Résumé de l'article

Au cours des années 1930 et 1940, la crise économique et la guerre mondiale ont contribué à saper le raisonnement idéologique persistant au Canada voulant que le gouvernement devait jouer un rôle non interventionniste dans les sphères sociale et économique. Pour Howard P. Robinson (1874–1950), propriétaire de journal et capitaliste de Saint-Jean (N.-B.), cette tendance s'inscrivait dans le cadre d'une remise en cause plus vaste de ce qu'il considérait comme l'héritage britannique au Canada. Partisan de l'idée de la « britannicité » définie en termes racialistes et impérialistes, il croyait au maintien rigoureux de l'ordre social et à la philosophie du laissez-faire comme aspects clés de la tradition britannique. De plus en plus, cependant, la montée de la social-démocratie et l'intégration économique et culturelle avec les États-Unis ont rendu anachronique la vision du monde de Robinson au sein des vues de la bourgeoisie canadienne. La position de Robinson n'était pas sans contradictions, mais sa notion durable de « britannicité » autorise une étude de cas archétypale sur la mentalité d'un membre conservateur de l'élite économique canadienne à une époque de transformations majeures.

Howard Robinson and the “British Method”: A Case Study of Britishness in Canada during the 1930s and 1940s¹

DON NERBAS

Abstract

During the 1930s and 1940s economic crisis and world war in Canada worked to erode the persistent ideological claim that government best played a largely hands-off role in social and economic life. For Howard P. Robinson (1874–1950), a Saint John, New Brunswick, newspaper owner and capitalist, this trend was part of a broader challenge to what he believed was the British tradition in Canada. Subscribing to a sense of Britishness that was both racialist and imperialist, he believed the strict maintenance of social order and laissez-faire philosophy to be key aspects of the British tradition. Increasingly, however, the rising tide of social democracy and economic and cultural integration with the United States made Robinson’s worldview anachronistic within the outlook of the Canadian bourgeoisie. Robinson’s position was not without its contradictions, but his enduring sense of Britishness provides an archetypal case study of the mentalité of a conservative member of Canada’s economic élite during a time of significant changes.

Résumé

Au cours des années 1930 et 1940, la crise économique et la guerre mondiale ont contribué à saper le raisonnement idéologique persistant au Canada voulant que le gouvernement devait jouer un rôle non interventionniste dans les sphères sociale et économique. Pour Howard P. Robinson (1874–1950), propriétaire de journal et capitaliste de Saint-Jean (N.-B.), cette tendance s’inscrivait dans le cadre d’une remise en cause plus vaste de ce qu’il considérait comme l’héritage britannique au Canada. Partisan de l’idée de la « britannicité » définie en termes racialistes et impérialistes, il croyait au main-

The author would like to thank David Frank for providing feedback on multiple versions of this paper, Phil Buckner for his useful comments during the session at which this paper was delivered, the anonymous referees and editors of the *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* for their helpful feedback, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for financial assistance.

rien rigoureux de l'ordre social et à la philosophie du laissez-faire comme aspects clés de la tradition britannique. De plus en plus, cependant, la montée de la social-démocratie et l'intégration économique et culturelle avec les États-Unis ont rendu anachronique la vision du monde de Robinson au sein des vues de la bourgeoisie canadienne. La position de Robinson n'était pas sans contradictions, mais sa notion durable de « britannicité » autorise une étude de cas archétypale sur la mentalité d'un membre conservateur de l'élite économique canadienne à une époque de transformations majeures.

R.B. Bennett's New Deal radio broadcasts in January 1935 came as an unpleasant surprise to some listeners. His supporters in the 1930 election could barely have imagined that Bennett would publicly proclaim the death of *laissez-faire* five years later, but that is what he did, albeit in a somewhat contrived and cynical way.¹ Howard P. Robinson (1874–1950), a Saint John, New Brunswick, capitalist and newspaper owner, wrote Bennett in early January 1935 to alert him to the siege atmosphere that his speeches were contributing to within an already beleaguered business community. "Personally," Robinson explained, "I have felt that we have come a long way towards recovery," but "[u]nfortunately, your remarks are being interpreted, or perhaps I should say misinterpreted, and through propaganda, it is being made to appear that we are going to have the New Deal, the N.R.A. and all kinds of interference, through despotic bureaucrats, with a normal trend of business." Citing the need to foster the self-reliant "pioneering spirit" of years gone by, Robinson claimed that "[i]n the Maritime Provinces at least, nine men out of ten ... are firm believers in the efficacy of the British method in dealing with the conditions arising from the cycle of depression which we have been moving through. We, here, believe in evolution, not in revolution, and nothing is quite as alarming as what the man-in-the-street calls 'a Yankee nostrum'."² The "British method," according to Robinson's view of the world, was a breakwater guarding against the troubling currents he observed south of the border.

Britishness shaped Robinson's view of the social structure that he had climbed so successfully; it was, indeed, ubiquitous in his worldview. This paper examines the ways in which Robinson understood Britishness and the

1 Alvin Finkel emphasizes the fundamentally conservative intentions behind Bennett's New Deal addresses and the support they received within the nation's elite in *Business and Social Reform in the Thirties* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1979), 36–8. See also Donald Forster and Colin Read, "The Politics of Opportunism: The New Deal Broadcasts," *Canadian Historical Review* 60, no. 3 (1979): 324–9. The earlier view of H. Blair Neatby in *The Politics of Chaos: Canada in the Thirties* (Toronto: Macmillan Company of Canada, 1972), 64–8, tends to place heavier emphasis on the sense of shock the New Deal addresses produced among Conservatives.

2 Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), R.B. Bennett Papers, MG 26 K, vol. 715, 439096–8, Howard P. Robinson to R.B. Bennett, 7 January 1935.

HOWARD ROBINSON AND THE “BRITISH METHOD”: A CASE STUDY
OF BRITISHNESS IN CANADA DURING THE 1930s AND 1940s

British tradition during the 1930s and 1940s, thus offering a case study of how these concepts were understood and articulated by a conservative member of Canada's economic élite. Examining a specific variant of Britishness during a period when economic crisis and political change threatened old truisms, this study engages the “British World” concept, most prominently championed by Phillip Buckner, which has tended to emphasize the unifying impulse of Britishness and its ability to construct a consensual empire.³ Yet, as Buckner and other scholars have also recognized, Britishness had long been a remarkably open-ended concept that was interpreted in a variety of contingent ways, including a range of liberal, radical, and social-democratic meanings. This was so when early twentieth century social reformers looked to British precedents, and the enduring popular relevance of the British connection was dramatically in view when King George VI and Queen Elizabeth visited Canada on a royal tour of all nine provinces in 1939; they were greeted by nearly one-third of the Canadian population, some three million people.⁴ Moreover, the massive post-war British migration to Canada — 600,000 people between 1945 and 1957 — helped shore up and transform the wider British World in Canada, just as public intellectuals expressed a renewed appreciation for the British liberal tradition during World War II and in the anti-communist political climate of the early Cold War.⁵ The case of Howard Robinson throws light upon a different understanding of Britishness, one which assumed racialist thinking, endorsed ideals of free enterprise and championed imperialist sentiment. As these were eroded by an approaching social democratic age, disillusionment set in among its advocates. Increasingly, Britishness of this sort became anachronistic and divisive rather than unifying. Robinson's experience was an archetypal instance of broader trends amongst his social peers who sat on the boards of major business institutions and also grappled with the onset of a new era.

Howard P. Robinson was a recognized figure in national business circles. Detesting publicity and preferring to operate behind the scenes, he often remained beyond the public's gaze, and relatively little is known about him even among specialists in regional or business history. Some contemporary observers did take notice of him: representatives of the social democratic and communist left could both agree after World War II that Robinson was among

3 Phillip Buckner, “Introduction,” in *Canada and the British World: Culture, Migration, and Identity*, eds., Phillip Buckner and R. Douglas Francis (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006), 6–8.

4 John Herd Thompson, “Canada and ‘The Third Empire’, 1901–1939,” in *Canada and the British Empire*, ed., Phillip Buckner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 103.

5 Phillip Buckner, “Canada and the End of Empire, 1939–1982,” in *Canada and the British Empire*, 116; R. Douglas Francis, “Historical Perspectives on Britain: The Ideas of Canadian Historians Frank H. Underhill and Arthur R.M. Lower,” in *Canada and the British World*, 317–20.

the small élite that dominated Canada's economic life.⁶ He was already reaching the twilight of his career by that time; in 1944 Robinson was attempting to disengage from active involvement in business life and by the following year he had sold his newspaper and radio interests to K.C. Irving.⁷ Though increasingly inactive, Robinson remained a prominent business figure, as in 1945 when the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) appointed him to its board of directors — a distinction which made him the first-ever true Maritime resident to hold a CPR directorship. He also remained active in cultural affairs, continuing to serve on the board of governors of the New Brunswick Museum, to which he had been appointed in 1929.

These heights were not foretold by Robinson's relatively modest social origins. He was born in the village of Elgin, Albert County, New Brunswick, in 1874. His father Robert D. Robinson farmed, worked as a schoolteacher and superintendent for Albert County, and became a small manufacturer of birch spools. The family was deeply rooted in the region: his mother, Lavenia Robinson, née Stiles, was of pre-Loyalist descent, while Loyalist ancestry existed on his father's side. As a child, Robinson moved to the bustling agricultural centre of Sussex, where his father operated a local newspaper, the *King's County Record*. Robinson attended Mount Allison University and later joined his father's newspaper and printing business; he helped his father establish a farming paper, the *Maritime Farmer*, and Robinson took over and reorganized the business after his father's death in 1901.⁸ He soon moved to Saint John and became involved in the province's emergent telephone business, orchestrating a merger between the two competing provincial companies in 1906. Moving into the securities business before World War I, and power and street railways during the war, Robinson was poised to become one of the most influential capitalists of the Maritime region in the following decades.⁹ He bought his first Saint John daily in 1920 and by 1927 controlled the city's entire daily press, moving into radio the following decade; he promoted the ascendancy of pulp and paper in the 1920s and became associated with the tri-

6 Tim Buck, *Canada: The Communist Viewpoint* (Toronto: Progress Books, 1948), 270; Watt Hugh McCollum, *Who Owns Canada? An Examination of the Facts Concerning the Concentration of Ownership and Control of the Means of Production, Distribution and Exchange in Canada* (Ottawa: Woodsworth House, 1947), 10–11.

7 New Brunswick Museum (hereafter NBM), John Clarence Webster Papers (hereafter JCWP), S 194, file 230, Robinson to John Clarence Webster, 19 October 1944.

8 "Business, Professional Men Gather to Pay Final Tribute At Late Publisher's Funeral," *King's County Record* (Sussex) (31 August 1950), 1; "Howard P. Robinson Dies; Outstanding Business Leader," *Telegraph-Journal* (Saint John) (24 August 1950), 1 and 5; *Census of Canada*, 1871, Albert County, Elgin, Division 2, 5; *Census of Canada*, 1881, Albert County, Elgin, 1.

9 "Battles Fought and Won By Maritime Publisher," *Financial Post* (Toronto) (16 January 1937), Section 2, 2; G.P. Burchill, *The Story of the New Brunswick Telephone Company: As told to the Writer by one of its Founders — Mr. Howard P. Robinson* (Nelson-Miramichi, 1974).

HOWARD ROBINSON AND THE "BRITISH METHOD": A CASE STUDY
OF BRITISHNESS IN CANADA DURING THE 1930S AND 1940S

umvirate of companies that dominated that industry in New Brunswick; he remained an imposing figure on the board of directors of the New Brunswick Telephone Company; and he accumulated directorships of numerous other companies, including the Royal Bank of Canada and Famous Players of Canada.¹⁰

Robinson's network of contacts extended to the commanding heights of business and political life in Canada and beyond. He maintained relatively close contact with business figures who had left New Brunswick to accumulate fortunes abroad, including Lord Beaverbrook and Sir James Dunn; and he also cultivated friendships with Canadian business titans such as CPR president Sir Edward Beatty and Morris Wilson, Sir Herbert Holt's successor as president of the Royal Bank of Canada. In New Brunswick Robinson was ever-present — though often unseen. He was one of a group of powerful capitalists principally interested in the forestry sector who, in response to the New Brunswick Liberal government's promise to aggressively extend public power development, worked — successfully — to elect J.B.M. Baxter's Conservatives in the important 1925 provincial election.¹¹ He was also a leading supporter of the Maritime Rights movement, indicative of that movement's pro-business bias in Saint John.¹² The non-partisanship of the Maritime Rights

10 The story of Robinson's acquisition of Saint John newspapers is a complex one, aspects of which are covered in Don Nerbas, "Adapting to Decline: The Changing Business World of the Bourgeoisie in Saint John, NB, in the 1920s," *Canadian Historical Review* 89, no. 9 (June 2008): 177–9. Aspects of Robinson's involvement in the newspaper and radio business can also be gleaned from Jo Anne Claus, *On Air in the Maritimes Since 1928* (Saint John: Acadia Broadcasting Limited, 2007), especially 2–10. For the rise of pulp and paper in New Brunswick, see Bill Parenteau, "The Woods Transformed: The Emergence of the Pulp and Paper Industry in New Brunswick, 1918–1931," *Acadiensis* 22, no. 1 (Autumn 1992): 5–43.

11 "Baxter Declares Veniot Cause of Return to N.B.," *Telegraph-Journal* (8 August 1925), 1; Provincial Archives of New Brunswick (hereafter PANB), R.B. Hanson Papers, MC 1247, 6/41, R.B. Hanson to J.B.M. Baxter, 29 July 1925; LAC, Arthur Meighen Papers (hereafter AMP), MG 26 I, vol. 116, 68164, George B. Jones to Arthur Meighen, 18 July 1925; *ibid.*, 68165, Jones to Meighen, 23 July 1925; *ibid.*, 68175, Meighen to Howard Robinson, 17 August 1925.. See also Paul-Emile McIntyre, "The Development of Hydro-Electric Power at Grand Falls, New Brunswick: An Issue in Provincial Politics, 1920–1926" (M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1974).

12 Though Maritime Rights demanded state intervention, the typical rhetoric of the movement — at least in Saint John, which had become the leading centre of the movement by 1925 — invoked Confederation to present the demand as the fulfillment of a contractual obligation, and explained the regional economic crisis of the 1920s in a manner that helped shore-up the legitimacy of the region's political and business leadership. See Don Nerbas, "Revisiting the Politics of Maritime Rights: Bourgeois Saint John and Regional Protest in the 1920s," *Acadiensis* 37, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2008): 110–30. Earlier studies pointing to the class and ideological biases of Maritime Rights include G.A. Rawlyk, "Nova Scotia's Regional Protest, 1867–1967," *Queen's Quarterly* 75 (Spring 1968): 105–23; David Frank, "The 1920s: Class and Region, Resistance and Accommodation," in *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, eds., E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise (Toronto and Fredericton: University of Toronto Press and

movement also reflected the manner in which Robinson operated his newspaper, which was generally non-partisan, save for cases such as the 1925 provincial election when the broader interests of private enterprise were perceived to be under threat. Robinson's ideological tendencies, which linked intense imperial sentiment with the strictures of self-reliance and private enterprise, made him more sympathetic to the Conservative cause, but by no means was he a reliable party man.

The political world was becoming much more complicated by 1935. Months after Bennett's New Deal addresses, Robinson continued to lament what he considered to be the prime minister's "right-angled turn," which, Robinson complained, helped to legitimize "any radical proposal which might be made." He also worried about the lately rebellious English-born MP from Vancouver, H.H. Stevens, whose recent investigation of price spreads had embarrassed some important Toronto retailers.¹³ Though Stevens "was one of those Englishmen who inherited his political principles at the seat of the Empire," Robinson disapprovingly noted that "he is believed to represent the Hyde Park idea," London's famed site of popular protest.¹⁴ Robinson, like many others, did not propose a thoughtless aping of the mother country, for political dissent was just as repugnant to him at the seat of empire as it was anywhere else. Like many of his contemporaries, he propounded the idealistic ambition of creating a "Better Britain" in Canada.¹⁵ In fact, Robinson claimed to feel "more British than many people living in England."¹⁶

Moreover, Robinson felt New Brunswick had already achieved a special place within the history of the British Empire, being, as he believed it was, a product of the empire's "greatest romance": the Loyalist migration.¹⁷ The Loyalists, who founded New Brunswick in 1784 and incorporated the City of Saint John the following year, had throughout the nineteenth century become

Acadiensis Press, 1993), 233–71; and Ian McKay and Suzanne Morton, "The Maritimes: Expanding the Circle of Resistance," in *The Workers' Revolt in Canada, 1917–1925*, ed., Craig Heron (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 43–86. The themes of regional solidarity and progressivism are emphasized in the classic account of Maritime Rights by E.R. Forbes, *The Maritime Rights Movement, 1919–1927* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979).

13 J.R.H. Wilbur, "H.H. Stevens and the Reconstruction Party," *Canadian Historical Review* 45, no. 1 (March 1964): 6–12.

14 NBM, JCWP, file 228, Robinson to J.C. Webster, 30 April 1935.

15 Buckner, "Introduction," in *Canada and the British World*, 7; Kurt Kornecki, "Britishness, Canadianness, Class, and Race: Winnipeg and the British World, 1880s–1910s," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 172.

16 House of Lords Record Office (hereafter HLRO), Lord Beaverbrook Papers (hereafter LBP), file 250, Robinson to Lord Beaverbrook, 25 January 1939.

17 University of New Brunswick Archives (hereafter UNBA), LBP, box 141, file 27, 87601, Robinson to Beaverbrook, 26 August 1948 ; HLRO, LBP, Robinson to Beaverbrook, 23 August 1929, and 24 January 1942.

HOWARD ROBINSON AND THE “BRITISH METHOD”: A CASE STUDY
OF BRITISHNESS IN CANADA DURING THE 1930S AND 1940S

a subject of sustained mythmaking. The Loyalist myth, as described by Murray Barkley, emphasized the themes of self-sacrifice and divine purpose and portrayed the Loyalists as hailing from elite social origins.¹⁸ Robinson built upon this myth in a 1932 essay, which was read by New Brunswick Lieutenant-Governor Hugh H. McLean before a gathering of the New Brunswick Loyalist Society on Loyalist Day (18 May) in Saint John.¹⁹ Setting out to rehabilitate the Loyalists from what he considered to be unfair treatment at the hands of American scholars, Robinson argued that leaders on the revolutionary side consisted of a band of smugglers, thieves, and business failures, including the likes of Paul Revere and Samuel Adams. The Loyalists, by contrast, were solid, property-owning citizens who were also joined by a racially diverse group; Robinson claimed “[a]ll classes, creeds and nationalities ... seem to have come to this province with the Loyalists.” While the crown could thus work to unite a racially and socially diverse group, Robinson seemed to believe that this larger group could not count themselves among the Loyalists, since they had come to the “province with the Loyalists,” not, Robinson implied, as Loyalists themselves.²⁰ A broader lesson, in Robinson’s view, could be learned from this homogeneous, property-owning class who sacrificed everything for the idea of empire. “At all times and in all revolutions,” he asserted,

it is the man without stake in a community, the floater or irresponsible individual, who is the first to demand an appeal to force in settling his difficulties with his fellow men. The more mature brain of the educated individual and his natural desire not to jeopardize his stake in the community by resorting to arms, naturally, puts him in the class of those who favor constitutional methods of correcting wrongs rather than by restoring to arms. The Loyalists were of this latter class.²¹

Robinson thus viewed property ownership as central to responsible citizenship and political maturity, and the Loyalists were in his view a beacon of both. He

18 Murray Barkley, “The Loyalist Tradition in New Brunswick: the Growth and Evolution of an Historical Myth, 1825–1914,” *Acadiensis* 4, no. 2 (Spring 1975): 5 and 45.

19 “Loyalist Meeting 4 p.m. to be Close of Celebrations,” *Telegraph-Journal* (18 May 1932), 14; “History of Loyalists for Use in Schools Suggested By Dr. White,” *Telegraph-Journal* (19 May 1932), 1, 5, and 11. Robinson was one of the original incorporators of the New Brunswick Loyalist Society, which was established in the early 1930s; the prior version of this provincial Loyalist society had been operating earlier in the century, before World War I, but it eventually died out. See NBM, Alice Fairweather Papers, S 190, file 17, New Brunswick Loyalist Society, Minute Book, 12.

20 NBM, Howard P. Robinson and J.E. Humphreys Papers (hereafter R&HP), S 78–1, file 8, H.P. Robinson, “The United Empire Loyalists,” 18 May 1932, 4–5, 11 and 13.

21 *Ibid.*, 5.

believed their story should occupy a privileged place within the empire's history; "many incidents in the Empire's history have been preserved by historians and poets," he waxed, "and the majority of them trivial in comparison with the exploits of the Loyalists."²²

Believing the Loyalists to be a shining example of good citizenship and imperial spirit, Robinson sought to promote their history through the New Brunswick Museum. He was among the early promoters of the idea of a provincial museum and was a central figure in its eventual realization in 1929.²³ His interest in a provincial museum was born out of a concern "for future generations and for good citizenship reasons"; far from arcane motivations, Robinson consciously envisioned the museum as a project through which a civic identity would be constructed in which the Loyalist past would be central.²⁴ As chairman of the museum's finance committee he played a crucial role in soliciting money from wealthy friends for a new museum building. From the beginning, Robinson thought of the New Brunswick Museum as a sort of shrine to the Loyalists. That being the case, he was sufficiently savvy to realize that funds were more likely to be obtained from the provincial government if Acadian history was also represented in the museum.²⁵ However, cost overruns at the University of New Brunswick apparently made Premier Baxter reticent about financing the construction of a museum building with government money.²⁶ Eventually, the City of Saint John came through with \$100,000 while private donations totaled something in the neighborhood of \$70,000. The provincial government also in the end kicked in \$75,000 in Dominion government funds earmarked for relief projects.²⁷

The museum building officially opened on Douglas Avenue on 16 August 1934, as part of a three-day celebration of the 150th anniversary of the founding of New Brunswick. An imposing grey structure with pillars lining the entrance and the dates "1784" and "1934" embossed on the front façade above, the museum itself became, as Greg Marquis has observed, "[t]he major edifice that would mark the 150th anniversary of the Loyalist province."²⁸ Robinson had advised such a course in March in private correspondence with fellow New Brunswick Museum board member Dr. John Clarence Webster,

22 Ibid., 3–4.

23 W. Austin Squires, *The History and Development of the New Brunswick Museum (1842–1945)*, intro. by Dr. J.C. Webster (Saint John: New Brunswick Museum, 1945), 16.

24 HLRO, LBP, Robinson to Beaverbrook, 19 October 1929.

25 NBM, JCWP, file 228, Robinson to Webster, 8 February 1929.

26 Ibid., Robinson to Webster, 7 March 1929.

27 Squires, *The History and Development of the New Brunswick Museum*, 17 and 19; NBM, JCWP, file 228, Robinson to Webster, 3 February 1930.

28 Greg Marquis, "Commemorating the Loyalists in the Loyalist City: Saint John, New Brunswick, 1883–1934," *Urban History Review* 33, no. 1 (Fall 2004): 30.

HOWARD ROBINSON AND THE "BRITISH METHOD": A CASE STUDY
OF BRITISHNESS IN CANADA DURING THE 1930S AND 1940S

writing that "if we can organize a celebration of the 150th anniversary of this Province and make the formal opening of the Museum at that time the centre of our activities, it will do a great deal to introduce it to the public."²⁹ The following month he urged that steps be taken to "crystallize public opinion on this very necessary celebration." He ultimately played an active role in planning the event.³⁰

After his election as president of the museum in 1948, Robinson reflected on the broad development of the institution and its collection. He was not entirely satisfied. Dr. Webster and his wife had played a major role in developing the museum's collection. Even though Robinson appreciated their support, he lamented that their activities "seem unfortunately ... to run towards the perpetuation of the things which our early French settlers did." He also questioned the appropriateness of using museum resources to preserve "bronzes and things which come to us from China." Arguing that Acadian history was being looked after in the province at the Beauséjour Museum, Robinson maintained that the New Brunswick Museum should be left "free to deal with and perpetuate the history of the United Empire Loyalists," as well as the "Golden Age of Sail." These two themes, Robinson believed, were "of supreme importance to all New Brunswickers" and should form the museum's focus.³¹ The important past was the British past, to Robinson's mind, as both themes celebrated Britishness: the moral resolve and courage of the Loyalists could be celebrated in the first, and British shipbuilding ingenuity and commercial dominance in the second. Robinson had articulated this view to Webster ten years earlier. "I am unfortunately one of those who do not think the French period of our history was an important one," he stated, "except from the standpoint of human interest. The real start of the Maritime Provinces began when the Yorkshiremen and the New Englanders came in prior to the American Revolution; subsequently, the arrival of the Loyalists did the real trick in establishing this as a white man's country."³² Casting the British as a progressive and dynamic race, a race from which he descended, Robinson argued that the "genius of British people" went even beyond the formal boundaries of empire: "France never had any offshoot like the United States, South Africa or Canada springing from her loins."³³ Such biological metaphors articulated the racist underpinning of Robinson's sense of Britishness and, by extension, his own sense of racial superiority; as some of his surviving per-

29 NBM, JCWP, file 228, Robinson to Webster, 26 March 1934.

30 Ibid., 12 April 1934, 9 April 1934, and 21 June 1934.

31 UNBA, LBP, box 141, file 27, 87601, Robinson to Beaverbrook, 26 August 1948, and 87602-3, 17 August 1948.

32 NBM, JCWP, file 228, Robinson to Webster, 6 May 1938.

33 Ibid., Robinson to Webster, 5 February 1937.

sonal papers reveal, he was deeply interested in his own genealogy and had been active in establishing his own Loyalist ancestry.³⁴

Though he viewed the United States as a testament to the ingenuity of the British race, Robinson was increasingly wary of political and cultural developments south of the border in the 1930s and was concerned that Prime Minister Bennett was preparing to mimic the New Deal policies of Roosevelt in 1935. Robinson had been much more comfortable with Bennett's earlier sentiment, expressed in Saint John during Loyalist Day celebrations two years earlier, when the prime minister advised listeners to look to the example of the Loyalists for inspiration in hard times: "we pray in these days of universal depression we may cultivate their virtues and emulate their example."³⁵ The continuing economic depression and the concomitant political ferment made it increasingly difficult for politicians to sustain an adherence to orthodox economic principles that restrained government intervention, however; and even Bennett, widely appreciated as a stalwart of rugged individualism within the national business class, was forced to acknowledge growing calls for a more active state role in economic and social life.³⁶ Robinson perceived these devel-

34 Robinson wrote to W.C. Milner, Dominion Archivist for the Maritime Provinces (1912–1928), of his desire to discover his Loyalist ancestry in 1927: "I am very much interested in this matter because if I have any direct associations with the Loyalists [*sic*] people it is my intention to stir up the people of that blood in this province and have them organize a society in keeping their history." See NBM, W.C. Milner Papers (hereafter WCMP), S 11, file 6, Robinson to W.C. Milner, 25 April 1927. Robinson apparently succeeded on both fronts, since he joined the newly established New Brunswick Loyalist Society a few years later. Some of Robinson's genealogical research can be found in NBM, R&HP, S 78–1, file 4. Correspondence revealing Robinson's interest in family history, as well as the history of Albert County, can be found in NBM, WCMP, files 6 and 7. Robinson helped finance a history of Albert County to be written by Milner. Though drafts of this history survive at the New Brunswick Museum, it was never published. Robinson and Milner had significant disagreement over the manuscript, with Robinson demanding a more rigorous treatment of family histories. For example, see NBM, WCMP, file 6, Robinson to Milner, 23 September 1930, and 27 February 1933. Their personal relationship appears to have deteriorated as well, and Milner accused Robinson of trying to take over the project. See, especially, *ibid.*, file 7, Milner to Robinson, 11 February 1935, and 12 February 1938. Robinson, as his penciled remarks on a copy of the manuscript read, considered the text to be "so full of careless errors in copying and arranging as to require complete re-writing"; but, "Mr. Milner was very old + re-writing was out of the question." See NBM, R&HP, file 10, "History of Albert County," n.d. The conflict between the two men was, it seems, also the product of differing political outlooks. And, Milner, who was nearly 90 years old at the time, could be equally critical of Robinson's work; the *Telegraph-Journal*, Milner wrote Robinson, "is regarded as a hack to serve you and your interests in public utilities and is useless as a public servant." See NBM, WCMP, file 6, Milner to Robinson, 11 February 1935.

35 Marquis, "Commemorating the Loyalists in the Loyalist City," 30; "Bennett Praises Loyalist Spirit," *Telegraph-Journal* (19 May 1933), 11.

36 Larry A. Glassford, *Reaction and Reform: The Politics of the Conservative Party under R.B. Bennett, 1927–1938* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 87–8.

HOWARD ROBINSON AND THE “BRITISH METHOD”: A CASE STUDY
OF BRITISHNESS IN CANADA DURING THE 1930S AND 1940S

opments not merely as challenges to the specific economic order, but also to the British World itself, both being directly linked in his mental universe.

His continued invocation of things British needs also to be understood in relation to developments on the left. Since the end of World War I, as Ian McKay has observed, the major left formation, centred around the Communist Party of Canada, was decidedly internationalist in outlook, just as public intellectuals of the 1930s, including A.R.M. Lower and figures associated with the League for Social Reconstruction, such as Frank H. Underhill and F.R. Scott, looked upon the imperial connection with attitudes ranging from indifference to outright hostility.³⁷ It was no accident that Robinson developed a particular animus towards university professors during the decade.³⁸ Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) leader J.S. Woodsworth was, meanwhile, “an idealistic internationalist” and pacifist, who in September 1939 went so far as to oppose Canada’s involvement in another European war alongside Britain.³⁹ These observations require some qualification, however. Thinkers on the left often opposed British imperialism without opposing Britishness as such and, as James Naylor has demonstrated, Britishness, including calls for “British Justice,” persisted in left and labour circles throughout the 1930s — although even this sense of Britishness was “often overtly dismissed in favour of a broader internationalism.”⁴⁰ Though British identity remained ubiquitous, the Canadian left was at the very least becoming more nuanced — and ambiguous — in its embrace of Britishness. Robinson had little patience for such views and continued to see imperialism and unfettered capitalism as central to the British tradition. According to this outlook, the left was categorically opposed to all that was good in the British tradition. And, indeed, as the American-born union movement, the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO), came to represent the greatest threat to employers at the workplace during the last half of the 1930s, others like Robinson unfurled the Union Jack in defiance.⁴¹

37 Ian McKay, *Rebels, Reds, Radicals: Rethinking Canada’s Left History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2005), 155–69; Francis, “Historical Perspectives on Britain,” 309–21; Michiel Horn, *The League for Social Reconstruction: Intellectual Origins of the Democratic Left in Canada, 1930–1942* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 11–12.

38 For example, see NBP, JCWP, file 228, Robinson to Webster, 8 January 1938.

39 Allen Mills, *Fool for Christ: The Political Thought of J.S. Woodsworth* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 210.

40 James Naylor, “Canadian Labour Politics and the British Model, 1920–1950,” in *Canada and the British World*, 288–308.

41 The decisive confrontation with the CIO occurred at General Motors of Canada’s operations in Oshawa in 1937. See Irving Abella, “Oshawa 1937,” in *On Strike: Six Key Labour Struggles in Canada, 1919–1949*, ed., Irving Abella (Toronto: James Lewis & Samuel, 1974), 93–128; and John T. Saywell, *‘Just call me Mitch’: The Life of Mitchell F. Hepburn* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1991), 303–33. Opponents of the CIO often claimed the union and its

Such efforts to appropriate the British tradition were highly contested, however. Supporters and representatives of the CIO commonly viewed their struggle in terms of the fulfillment of a different British tradition. United Automobile Workers president Homer Martin, fresh from the CIO's epic battle with General Motors in Flint, addressed striking autoworkers in Oshawa in 1937 during their important battle with General Motors of Canada, and, aware of the cultural framework of his listeners, placed their struggle within a longer history of social progress within the British Empire, arguing that Ontario's hysterically anti-CIO Liberal Premier, Mitch Hepburn, "seeks to turn back the clock of the history of the British Empire."⁴² And, Earl Rowe, leader of the Ontario Conservatives, argued that Hepburn's hard-line and provocative stance ran counter to British "ideas and institutions."⁴³ Moreover, reform-minded élite figures, such as Vincent Massey, viewed social reform as entirely compatible with an evolving British tradition. As a Liberal Party organizer before his appointment as high commissioner for Canada in Britain in 1935, Massey unsuccessfully attempted to initiate a leftward swing within the Liberal Party, pressing for the adoption of "new Liberalism" and embracing the ideas of British economist John Maynard Keynes.⁴⁴ Massey, on the other

tactics, specifically the sit-down strike, were not British. Colonel George A. Drew emerged as a leading public opponent of the CIO after the Oshawa strike, having resigned as Ontario Conservative Party organizer in early May 1937 after the party's leader, Earl Rowe, refused to join Premier Mitch Hepburn in an anti-CIO coalition. Linking the CIO with Soviet methods, Drew argued: "Canadian labour is British. And Canadian labour in the end will follow the right course." He would, of course, be disappointed. Apparently caught up in the hysteria surrounding the Oshawa strike, on 19 April Drew even privately suggested that the Ontario Conservative Party declare its intention "to declare illegal any contract with any union which has its headquarters outside the British Empire." Such a declaration would have applied to the CIO as well as the conservative trade unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor; it appears to have been quickly forgotten. See LAC, George A. Drew Papers, MG 32 C3, vol. 33, file 303, "Speech Given by Col. G.A. Drew Over Station C.F.R.B. on Tuesday, 18th May 1937," and "Suggestion submitted to J.M. Macdonnell, April 19th 1937."

- 42 LAC, Strikes and Lockouts File, RG 27, vol. 383, file 68, "Martin's Fiery Utterance Weekend Strike Highlight," *Toronto Star* (12 April 1937).
- 43 The *Globe and Mail* argued that Rowe failed to understand that action, not ideals or institutions, was what made "Britain and the Empire great." "Pussyfooting Not British," *Globe and Mail* (11 May 1937), 6. The *Globe and Mail* was, especially during the Oshawa strike, under the direct influence of its president and publisher, C. George McCullagh, who was deeply interested in mining and worried about a CIO breakthrough in that field. McCullagh and Hepburn were united during the Oshawa strike and McCullagh later claimed that he had succeeded in influencing Hepburn to assume a strident anti-CIO position. See Brian J. Young, "C. George McCullagh and the Leadership League," (M.A. thesis, Queen's University, 1964), 41 and 47.
- 44 Claude Bissell, *The Young Vincent Massey* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 214–29; Vincent Massey, *What's Past is Prologue: The Memoirs of the Right Honourable Vincent Massey, C.H.* (Toronto: Macmillan Company of Canada Limited, 1963), 208–21.

HOWARD ROBINSON AND THE "BRITISH METHOD": A CASE STUDY
OF BRITISHNESS IN CANADA DURING THE 1930S AND 1940S

hand, considered some of those who expressed conservative ideas about the British Empire as "living intellectually in a pre-war era."⁴⁵

Robinson's ideology was residual, indeed, born of a time that was passing; and the British tradition was certainly broader and more amorphous than he recognized. He perceived contemporary political developments as a challenge to the propertied foundations of society and hoped for a reinvigorated imperial sentiment to shore up the old order. "I am rapidly coming to the point where I fear I am going to be one of those who believe that the only way of saving the British Empire is for the individual Britisher to get rough and rude and crude again and fight for his own peroperty [*sic*] as well as for his neighbour's," wrote Robinson in December 1938, explicitly aligning the empire's defence with the protection of private property.⁴⁶ Less than a year into World War II, he wondered whether the empire had become "over-civilized"; "the stuff that made the British Empire seems to have been civilized out of us," he lamented. "The British have been slapped, kicked and insulted by practically every nation in the world and it is about time that somebody showed a little bit of the good old British stuff that did not take this sort of back-talk from anybody"; "our only hope is to become rough, tough and dusty," concluded Robinson.⁴⁷ This prescription for a return to primal tactics was directed at both internal and external threats. Only months into the war, Robinson anticipated a resumption of battles on the domestic front after the war's end. The enemies were many:

I see indications in Canada of a quite active Communistic propaganda campaign being carried out by publishers of books; idealistic editors and newspaper contributors; college professors; uplifters working through institutions presumably patterned after English bodies of similar name and objects; clergymen, in most cases of the United Church, with an occasional Baptist; radio commentators, largely from the United States stations, and people of this ilk. When the war, either on land or sea, terminates, the front is going to be nearer home and I am one of those who favor getting organized to combat these spreaders of disruption at that time, because I anticipate that a lot of them will be released from the penalties of a restrictive character imposed by the war.⁴⁸

Lacking nuance in his view of political options to his left, Robinson applied the "communist" label freely in promoting the battle against adversaries of the social order as he understood it.

45 Vincent Massey to Lord Howard Penrith, 17 October 1933, as quoted in Massey, *What's Past is Prologue*, 203.

46 HLRO, LBP, Robinson to Beaverbrook, 2 December 1938.

47 NBM, JCWP, file 229, Robinson to Webster, 4 July 1940.

48 HLRO, LBP, Robinson to Beaverbrook, 17 November 1939.

He thus also embraced a very restrictive view of the realm of legitimate debate within the public sphere. Robinson was not alone in this, for economic crisis and the spread of radicalism during the 1930s had caused some ambivalence within Canada's big bourgeoisie towards democratic principles. William Lyon Mackenzie King spoke with a touch of hyperbole when he claimed the "national government" drive conducted behind the scenes during the 1935 federal election threatened "democracy," but he was no doubt correct in believing that its backers, the most vocal of whom was CPR president Sir Edward Beatty, wanted a coalition between the two major parties in order to push through legislation that — because of its unpopularity — no party by itself would dare propose.⁴⁹ Many national government supporters hoped, most specifically, for an amalgamation of the government-owned Canadian National Railways (CNR) with the CPR, arguing that such a course, though unpopular, was necessary to maintain the nation's credit.⁵⁰ Robinson, a friend of Beatty, was undoubtedly sympathetic in sentiment, if not an active supporter of this drive. Before the outbreak of World War II, Robinson expressed opinions that revealed considerable equanimity towards the apparent decline of democracy. In 1938 he expressed the view that "we are entering a period when dictatorships, even though temporary in character, are bound to make tremendous headway, due to their temporary efficiency in competition with the stumbling and blundering methods of our democracy." Though he believed democracy would win in the end, Robinson still saw the possibility of having "to go back to the Dark Ages and gradually creep back again to the Golden Age of Democracy."⁵¹

Robinson's important political ally from the 1925 provincial election, Supreme Court of New Brunswick Judge and former New Brunswick Conservative Premier J.B.M. Baxter, expressed opinions on world affairs of a more concrete nature that same year: "I wish England were clear of any diplomacy which may yet make her an ally of Soviet Russia and I hope Franco wins in Spain. I would rather have dictators from the better classes than submit to the dictatorship of those — or in the end — perhaps one, whose outlook is that of the criminal classes." As Britain sustained military defeats against the

49 "Whither Are We Tending To-day?" *Maritime Advocate and Busy East* (August 1935): 7.

50 The national government drive is touched upon in J.L. Granatstein, *The Politics of Survival: The Conservative Party of Canada, 1939–1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 42–3. The economic crisis had, it is important to remember, actually resulted in the suspension of democracy in Newfoundland during the 1930s. See James Overton, "Economic Crisis and the End of Democracy: Politics in Newfoundland during the Great Depression," *Labour/Le Travail* 26 (Fall 1990): 85–124. From an empire perspective, the national government campaign gained strength from the fact that a national government had been formed in Britain under Ramsay MacDonald in 1931.

51 NBM, JCWP, file 228, Robinson to Webster, 4 January 1938.

HOWARD ROBINSON AND THE "BRITISH METHOD": A CASE STUDY
OF BRITISHNESS IN CANADA DURING THE 1930S AND 1940S

Germans in 1940, Baxter turned his vitriol towards "the Ramsay MacDonalds' of Great Britain and the J.S. Woodsworths' of Canada and the deference which all Liberal Governments pay to the people of this stripe," whom he blamed for the empire's vulnerability.⁵² Baxter's political and cultural sensibilities — combining a reverence for Loyalism and social order with a dogmatic commitment to private enterprise — were similar to those of Robinson. And, in early 1939 C. George McCullagh, mining magnate and president and publisher of the *Globe and Mail*, established the short-lived Leadership League, an organization designed to rid political life of partisanship and decrease the size and presumed waste of government. The league was premised upon the notion that democracy required stronger leadership than was being provided by the main political parties, and the organization had some obvious authoritarian under-tones.⁵³ As economic crisis and radicalism spread, Robinson and other

52 PANB, MC 2990, 50, John B.M. Baxter Diary (1938), and 55, John B.M. Baxter Diary (1940).

53 "As a true believer in democratic government," McCullagh argued, "I am against fascism and all dictatorships." But the implications of his formulations were highly critical of the influence of popular opinion in the nation's political life. In one of his radio broadcasts, for example, which prefigured the establishment of the Leadership League, McCullagh condemned the nation's "political system" for causing what he believed was a perilous situation in Canada. As an example of the effect of the "political system," he cited a speech that R.B. Bennett delivered before leaving the country. McCullagh deemed the address "magnificent" and gave the following explanation: "Now that he is no longer shackled by your votes, he can come out in your interest and tell you the truth." The clear implication was that popular opinion restrained good leadership and that it was the role of leaders to guide the public — in apparent contradiction to the actual operation of democracy, where leaders are elected to represent the opinions of their constituents. See George McCullagh, *Marching on to What? First in Series of Five Radio Addresses Delivered by Mr. George McCullagh*, 15 January 1939, 6, and *Marching on to What? "An Appeal to Women" — Address no. 4*, 5 February 1939, 4. In his M.A. thesis on McCullagh and the Leadership League, Young concluded: "Although in its emphasis on leadership and centralization it had certain traits in common with fascism, the League can be better understood as the reaction to the depression of a young businessman who was relatively inexperienced in political affairs." (McCullagh also deployed Britishness in a manner similar to Robinson.) See Young, "C. George McCullagh and the Leadership League," 202 and *passim*, for more on McCullagh's worldview and the general political and economic context from which the Leadership League emerged. Certainly McCullagh was not a fascist, since the anti-individualism and irrationalism of fascist doctrines ran counter to the liberal philosophy espoused by McCullagh. However, it seems that McCullagh's ideas revealed more than simply political inexperience. Like Robinson, McCullagh was responding to what he perceived as the state's growing infringement on private enterprise and private property, and thus individuals such as McCullagh and Robinson demonstrate the manner in which anti-democratic and authoritarian tendencies or strategies can be accommodated within liberal thought, especially in times of crisis when property rights are perceived to be under threat. This conclusion is supported by Fernande Roy's systematic description of liberalism in *Progrès, harmonie, liberté: le libéralisme des milieux d'affaires francophones de Montréal au tournant du siècle* (Montréal: Borealis, 1988); and Ian McKay's use of Roy's framework in his influential essay, "The Liberal Order Framework: A Prospectus for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History," *Canadian Historical Review* 81, no. 4 (December 2000): 617–45.

upper-class Canadians on the political right adopted political tactics and beliefs that indicated a growing aloofness from democratic principles. Once World War II began and the empire was thus engaged in a war against fascism, however, the political context changed dramatically, and Robinson's letters ceased to overtly question the efficacy of democratic government. His focus shifted to winning the war, which came to mean specifically the defence of Britain against the threat of invasion.

With the war approaching, as a director of the Canadian Press (CP), Robinson expressed concern over the CP's dependence upon American sources for empire news, namely its dependence upon the Associated Press (AP). He had, indeed, been working to strengthen the CP's connection with London for the past ten years, lamenting the funneling of empire news through American sources as "an inter-Empire tragedy." This was a tragedy, to Robinson's mind, because AP news worked to undermine imperial sentiment in Canada. "I am convinced that this ... news," Robinson thundered, "together with the agitations of college professors and university organizations, has had a great deal to do with undermining of loyalty to the Empire which now undoubtedly exists in many parts of Canada."⁵⁴ Robinson encouraged Lord Beaverbrook to sponsor an empire news service, but Beaverbrook was unconvinced. He told Robinson that he did not believe in propaganda during peacetime and that his own daily newspaper, the London *Daily Mirror*, itself subscribed to the AP news service.⁵⁵ With the onset of war with Germany in September, the need for effective propaganda became more pressing. The dissemination of empire news was, believed Robinson, an important aspect of the propaganda campaign. He lamented the fact that Canadian newspapers were free to pick up news from news services of their choice and supported a CP proposal to the British Ministry of Information "that the British Government ... subsidize the cabling to Canada and the United States of important official statements and texts."⁵⁶ He was also critical of the radio broadcasts, which were delivered in a "super Oxford accent" and replete with idioms specific to England, that the British government was sending to North America; though these broadcasts were fine for Canada, they were a source of derision in the United States. He expressed dissatisfaction with the responses he received on all these fronts, though he pressed ahead, disseminating pamphlets passed to him by Beaverbrook and in the second half of 1940 arranging a trip to Canada for 45 leading American newspapermen in order to build support for the British war effort.⁵⁷ At the end of the war Robinson complained that Canada

54 HLRO, LBP, Robinson to Beaverbrook, 9 May and 5 June 1939.

55 Ibid., Beaverbrook to Robinson, 24 May 1939.

56 Ibid., 6 May 1940.

57 Ibid., 15 and 20 August 1940; Ibid., Robinson to Frank Darvall, Deputy Director, British Ministry of Information, American Division, 8 October 1940.

HOWARD ROBINSON AND THE “BRITISH METHOD”: A CASE STUDY
OF BRITISHNESS IN CANADA DURING THE 1930S AND 1940S

had received 90 percent of its war news from American sources, and he continued to press for a direct liaison between London and the CP.⁵⁸

In retrospect, this was an impossible battle because the underpinnings of the British World Robinson cherished were being eroded by the rising tides of continental integration and social democracy. Arthur Meighen’s brief and unsuccessful resurrection as leader of the Conservative Party in 1942 indicated that ultra-imperialist politics had become less effective since World War I. Meighen, who had in recent years stamped himself as a strident defender of private enterprise in his public pronouncements on the railway question, lost to the CCF candidate in the York South by-election in the spring; largely Anglo-Saxon and working class, the residents of York South were not swayed by Meighen’s ultra-imperialist “win-the-war” campaign, which promised little else than conscription and “national government.” Meighen was particularly stung by the defeat because it was in an Anglo-Saxon riding.⁵⁹ As Michiel Horn has noted, “the issue of imperial loyalty was losing its power to distract.”⁶⁰

Robinson responded to this development by championing the elevation of Manitoba Premier John Bracken to the leadership of the Conservative Party at the party convention later in the year, where the party was re-branded as the Progressive Conservative Party upon Bracken’s insistence. Robinson viewed the leftward shift of the party, or at least the appearance of such, as a necessity in order to combat the CCF after the war. He based this view upon the assumption that the Liberal Party would inevitably fall from power once the war ended, as had the Conservatives after the previous war.⁶¹ Months earlier, a group including Robinson and George McCullagh, as well as Arthur Meighen, believed that Bracken could possibly head a revitalized national government campaign, and though this idea fell apart quickly, Bracken’s financial backers, which included the CPR, expected to wield considerable clout.⁶² Robinson’s efforts appear to have been purely tactical — and did not signal a substantive ideological shift; as he recognized in 1938, “we must realize today that we are

58 Ibid., Robinson to Beaverbrook, 17 May 1945.

59 Granatstein, *The Politics of Survival*, 82–112; Roger Graham, *Arthur Meighen: A Biography*, vol. III (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Company, 1965), 130.

60 Horn, *The League for Social Reconstruction*, 12.

61 HLRO, LBP, Robinson to Beaverbrook, 9 December 1942.

62 Grant Dexter, Memo, 29 October 1942; J.W. Dafoe to Grant Dexter, 28 November 1942; J.W. Dafoe to Grant Dexter, 15 September 1943, in *Ottawa at War: The Grant Dexter Memoranda, 1939–1945*, eds. and intro. Frederick W. Gibson and Barbara Robertson (Winnipeg: Manitoba Record Society, 1994), 388, 391, and 441. Queens University Archives (hereafter QUA), Grant Dexter Papers (hereafter GDP), box 3, file 23, 2143, Clifford Sifton to Victor Sifton, 19 December 1942. See also John Kendle, *John Bracken: A Political Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 183–95.

living in an age of realism [*sic*] when ideas and ideals have got to be kept in cold storage until such a time as a change in public thinking and public sentiment again brings us back to an era of fair-play and encouragement for private enterprise. Until that time arrives I feel that it is wise to more or less compromise with the assassins.”⁶³ Regardless, his machinations went for naught, because the Liberal Party would stay in power until 1957, seven years after Robinson’s death.

Robinson never reconciled himself to the form of hegemony that was being negotiated in the 1940s, in which the Liberal Party played a particularly important role. Whereas Mackenzie King and the Liberals built electoral strength by accommodating public opinion in Québec, Robinson’s unbending imperial and racialist sentiments made it impossible for him to endorse or even consider such a strategy. One of the most significant challenges to the maintenance of the imperial connection in Canada was, according to Robinson in 1942, that “[o]ne-third of our population by blood, religion, sentiment and nationalistic ambitions, being located in or directly through Quebec, are either solidly anti-British or neutral.” He also cited the recently revealed fact that 52 percent of Canada’s total population was non-British as one of several fundamental challenges to the persistence of empire in Canada.⁶⁴ On the heels of the war, Robinson was troubled by the early shift towards a multicultural civic identity, complaining to Lord Beaverbrook in October 1945 about “a definite trend, which we get evidence of now in the demands for a Canadian flag, the recognition of Canadian ‘nationality’ and the obvious attempt to substitute a dirge called ‘Oh [*sic*] Canada’ for ‘The King.’”⁶⁵ The bitterness conveyed here bespeaks Robinson’s sense of marginalization and helplessness following the war.

Though the war was won, the British World he cherished was falling apart. Having supported Beaverbrook’s Empire Free Trade campaign in the 1930s, Robinson lamented indications of economic divergence between Britain and Canada following the war.⁶⁶ He had played a somewhat complicit role in producing such an outcome, however, something he never seemed to

63 PANB, Hanson Papers, 31/144, Robinson to R.B. Hanson, 4 May 1938.

64 HLRO, LBP, Robinson to Beaverbrook, 7 July 1942. The 1941 census was the first to indicate the nationwide population was primarily non-British. For the data see *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931*, vol. 1 (Ottawa, 1936), 710, and *Eighth Census of Canada, 1941*, vol. 4 (Ottawa, 1946), 2. When this fact — that Canada’s population was just over half non-British — was pointed out by the *Winnipeg Free Press* in 1944, a bitter debate in the press ensued. See Phillip Buckner, “The Long Goodbye: English Canadians and the British World,” in *Rediscovering the British World*, eds., Phillip Buckner and R. Douglas Francis (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005), 200.

65 HLRO, LBP, Robinson to Beaverbrook, 23 October 1945.

66 *Ibid.*, Beaverbrook to Robinson, 20 January 1932; Robinson to Beaverbrook, 31 December 1931 and 22 July 1947.

HOWARD ROBINSON AND THE "BRITISH METHOD": A CASE STUDY
OF BRITISHNESS IN CANADA DURING THE 1930S AND 1940S

acknowledge on a conscious level. Robinson had never been reticent about attracting American capital to Canada, and he had opposed the proposed pulpwood embargo in the 1920s, assuming an attitude that seemed to encourage economic integration with the United States.⁶⁷ Even more striking, Robinson sat on the board of directors of Famous Players of Canada, the Canadian subsidiary of Paramount Pictures, serving as both representative and critic of American-imported culture.⁶⁸ He was aware that Hollywood represented a challenge to the essentially British culture he sought to preserve in Canada, but he was resigned to the view that no definite solution existed.⁶⁹ That Robinson was resigned in this belief speaks to his ideological horizon, which did not encompass the possibility of substantive government intervention. In the post-war period it was essentially a cultural élite, not a business élite, that sought to draw upon the resources of the state in order to preserve British culture in Canada as a highbrow fortress against the mass culture of the United States. Even Bennett had been more flexible than Robinson in considering potential uses of the state in protecting the country from the dominance of American mass culture, most notably in the establishment of the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission in 1932; and Bennett had even encouraged state-ownership in the field of airlines during the House of Commons debates on the formation of Trans-Canada Air Lines in 1937.⁷⁰ Though Robinson believed economic liberalism to be intrinsic to the British Empire, on the North American continent actually existing economic liberalism tended to draw Canada closer to the United States, especially in a postwar environment where the United States was the unquestioned economic leader of the capitalist world. This contradiction apparently failed to register with Robinson, as his worldview appeared less and less capable of offering a relevant explanation of contemporary society. He turned inwards to an anti-modern past. In the 1940s Robinson became interested in the work of New Brunswick folklorist Louise Manny, who toured the New Brunswick countryside collecting ballads — with encouragement and a recording device from Lord Beaverbrook. With Manny's help in 1947, Robinson published a small collection of poems written by

67 LAC, AMP, vol. 121, 71303–5, Arthur Meighen to Robinson, 18 February 1924. For the pulpwood debate in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, see Bill Parenteau and L. Anders Sandberg, "Conservation and the Gospel of Economic Nationalism: The Canadian Pulpwood Question in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, 1918–1925," *Environmental History Review* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 55–83.

68 Robinson expressed critical views of Hollywood on numerous occasions. For example, see HLRO, LBP, Robinson to Beaverbrook, 16 January 1937, and NBM, JCWP, file 229, Robinson to Webster, 4 July 1940.

69 HLRO, LBP, Robinson to Beaverbrook, 27 October 1944.

70 Paul Rutherford, "The Persistence of Britain: The Culture Project in Postwar Canada," in *Canada and the End of Empire*, ed., Phillip Buckner (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005), 195–205; Debates of House of Commons, vol. III, 1937, 2208–12.

Miramichi journalist-poet Hedley Parker (1856–1935).⁷¹ Most of the ballads were set in a nineteenth-century past of hardy lumbermen in the New Brunswick forests.⁷²

As the economic and cultural ties of empire seemed to buckle after the war, Robinson grew concerned about developments in Britain as well, especially Churchill's decisive defeat by the Labour Party in 1945 and Britain's decision to leave India. Robinson's re-imagined nineteenth-century New Brunswick was undoubtedly beginning to appear more British to him than present-day Britain. He wondered whether many Canadians embraced more intense imperial sentiments than those actually charged with the responsibility of administering the British Empire.⁷³ Only by reasoning that recent developments were "the product of a socialized democracy and not the real feeling of the people of England" could one sustain a sense of kinship with the "Mother Country," lamented Robinson in 1949.⁷⁴ It was categorical: so-called "socialized democracy" existed in opposition to the "real feeling of the people of England." In an increasingly incomprehensible world Robinson was steadied only by his "unbounded faith in British character."⁷⁵ His world — the British World of Arthur Meighen, George McCullagh, and Sir Edward Beatty — was in deep crisis.

This crisis was, for Robinson, linked fundamentally to the expansion of the Canadian state into various facets of the nation's economic and social life. Voicing his disapproval of the idea of a managed economy, Robinson referred with derision to the "god-like individuals at Ottawa who are forcing the value of money down"; "by the accident of political or personal preference," he argued, these people have "become our temporary hitlers."⁷⁶ He characterized autocracy and bureaucracy as "first cousins to each other," expressing the classical liberal belief that government intervention constituted interference with individual freedom.⁷⁷ Not only was this a departure from the "British method," but the "old virtues" had been discarded and the primacy of Britishers ceded. Robinson explained: "we are living in an age when all political values, public or private morals, all the old virtues are thrown into the discard and we accept the theory that minorities, decadent races or races not sufficiently schooled in the ethics of civilization should be the masters of those

71 NBM, Louise Manny Papers, S 185, file 195, Louise Manny to Robinson, 18 October 1947, 23 October 1947, and 20 January 1948.

72 Hedley Parker, *Miramichi Poet: Six Poems By Hedley Parker*, ed., Louise Manny and intro. Lord Beaverbrook (Saint John: New Brunswick Museum, c1947).

73 HLRO, LBP, Robinson to Beaverbrook, 28 May 1946.

74 UNBA, LBP, R/file 1 (d), box 51 (a), 314666, Robinson to Beaverbrook, 20 December 1949.

75 HLRO, LBP, Robinson to Beaverbrook, 2 December 1945.

76 NBM, JCWP, Robinson to Webster, 18 February 1946.

77 *Ibid.*, 29 March 1945.

HOWARD ROBINSON AND THE "BRITISH METHOD": A CASE STUDY
OF BRITISHNESS IN CANADA DURING THE 1930S AND 1940S

whose background has come through the fiery furnace of experience."⁷⁸ Thus Robinson expressed his protest against the new age and the waning influence of racialist theories.

Scholars using the British World concept have tended to locate the British Empire's last gasp in Canada somewhere in the 1950s and 1960s.⁷⁹ And, indeed, José Igartua has argued that English Canada experienced its own Quiet Revolution during the 1960s, when English Canadians went through an abrupt "de-ethnicization," moving towards national identities that were not specifically British or tied to the country's imperial past.⁸⁰ The residual culture of empire did not disappear overnight in Canada and, indeed, a Britishness emphasizing individual rights, the rule of law, and democracy was revitalized in the postwar period under the rubric of the Commonwealth.⁸¹ The right-wing variant of Britishness that Robinson embraced, however, was more a part of the past than the future. Robinson's *mentalité* had emerged from the assumptions of the National Policy period, when British capital played a central role fueling enterprise in Canada, which was directed by businessmen who benefited from government aid but did not submit to government control.⁸² For scholars of the British World, this case study throws light upon the political and ideological uses of Britishness and the archetypal experience of a Canadian capitalist facing the new realities of the 1930s and 1940s. The anxieties of Robinson and other capitalists like him can be understood within the context of what Ian McKay has described as the liberal order's "second period of organic crisis" in Canada, when the resolution of major societal questions of the era still remained uncertain.⁸³ As the old economic order crumbled,

78 Ibid., 3 January 1950. Robinson was referring primarily to the Québécois in this passage's reference to "races."

79 Phillip Buckner, "Introduction," in *Canada and the End of Empire*, 9.

80 José Igartua, *The Other Quiet Revolution: National Identities in English Canada, 1945–71* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006).

81 Buckner, "Canada and the End of Empire" 113–14; Francis, "Historical Perspectives on Britain," 318–20. See also W.L. Morton, *The Canadian Identity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965 [1961]), 32–57.

82 As the economic marginalization of the Maritimes continued and as the Prairie provinces fell into financial difficulty in the 1930s, Robinson even came to view Confederation and National Policy expansion in the West as a mistake. Robinson's father had opposed Confederation. But, given Robinson's integration within national business circles, such views seem to reflect Robinson's lament for the passing of what he believed was a pre-Confederation golden age in the Maritimes rather than reflecting a definite stance against government aid to private enterprise. See NBM, WCMP, file 7, Robinson to Milner, 29 January 1934, and 24 February 1934, as well as *ibid.*, file 6, the memo attached to Robinson to Milner, 25 April 1927.

83 Ian McKay, "Canada as a Long Liberal Revolution: On Writing the History of Actually Existing Liberalisms, 1840s–1940s," in *Liberalism and Hegemony: Debating the Canadian Liberal Revolution*, eds., Jean-François Constant and Michel Ducharme (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 400.

Robinson's understanding of Britishness was rendered increasingly unconvincing. As such it was coming to occupy its place as a shibboleth of the right and provided a weak basis for the reconstitution of class power in a social democratic era.

* * *

DON NERBAS is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of New Brunswick, where he is completing a dissertation on the political life of Canada's big bourgeoisie from 1917 to 1947. His previous work has appeared in *Manitoba History*, *Acadiensis*, and the *Canadian Historical Review*.

DON NERBAS, doctorant à l'Université du Nouveau-Brunswick, termine une thèse sur la vie politique de la grande bourgeoisie canadienne entre 1917 et 1947. Certains de ses travaux ont déjà été publiés dans *Manitoba History*, *Acadiensis*, et la *Canadian Historical Review*.