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Report of the Annual Meeting

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A. R. M. Lower

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[See table of contents](#)

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## SOME NEGLECTED ASPECTS OF CANADIAN HISTORY

By A. R. M. LOWER

A great man, a great war, the intriguing sequences of politics, these are the subjects which naturally arrest the first attention of the historian and which secure a public for the books he writes. They form the high lights of history and it is safe to say that they always will receive the lion's share of attention. But hardly anyone would be disposed to claim that they constitute the sole content of history.

In the past, the writer on Canadian history has for the most part confined himself to the brilliantly visible subjects. He has mined the richest or the most readily accessible ore. He has written of statesmen and explorers, war and politics. These are worthy themes. They form the groundwork of our history. But they are not the whole story. Few persons in this present age would care to accept in its entirety Freeman's well-worn dictum that history is past politics. Neither is it past wars or explorations. All these are but history's handmaidens and it must avail itself alike of them and of any others it can find before it can claim to have achieved its aim, which is nothing short of a complete explanation of man's present in terms of his past.

The political and constitutional historian explains one segment of the present in terms of the past. His play has had a good run in Canada and, so far, the more important of the books turned out have had to do with these topics. Therein lies no cause of complaint for there is no denying the importance of our political development and the very considerable human interest which attaches to it. But is it not possible that this field is beginning to obey the law of diminishing returns? It has been tilled carefully, if not altogether systematically, and it is to be suspected that its fruits do not possess the piquant flavour which once characterized them. The broad lines of our internal political development have been traced. It is unlikely that they will have to be radically retraced. Most of the important figures have had their biographies. However, as time alters the perspectives in which they appear, fresh biographies may be expected. There is also probably room for further accounts of secondary personages, though we shall have to keep our sense of proportion and realize that persons whose actions were of considerable importance in the small theatre of a colony would probably occupy a very tiny niche in a larger hall of fame. But these will constitute only the gleanings from the field: the main harvest has been gathered.

Our place in the evolution of the modern Empire has also been rather intensively surveyed and while from time to time new material may be unearthed which will round out a corner here and there, there is not likely to be any wholesale revision of the generally accepted views on such subjects as the securing of responsible government. Important as that particular topic is, it is hard to see where much will be gained by its perpetual re-examination. On the other hand, some investigation of what might be called the "middle period" of Imperial relations, from Confederation to the Colonial Conference of 1897, might profitably still be made.

Nothing is more certain than that colonies founded by English-speaking people would have won through sooner or later to some form of self-government. From this point of view, the interest which attaches to our political and constitutional development is an interest in a process rather than in a result for the result was a foregone conclusion. There are other aspects of our growth in which the interest perhaps centres chiefly in the result because of the simple fact that the result is as yet by no means determined.

One of these is afforded in our geographical background. Canada is a country which has been made in defiance of geography. If some celestial being, intent on constructing some ideal commonwealth, were looking about the earth for a site for a model enterprise, almost the last area he would choose would surely be the present Dominion, with its disproportionate area of uninhabitable land, its various isolated sections, its rigid climate and its limited access to the sea. Here is a process, nation-building, still going on and whose result, to judge from our internal stresses and strains, is not yet entirely assured. It is the uncertainty of the result which lends attractiveness to the process.

But the process has gone far enough at least to constitute a very substantial tentative result. Despite geography, here we are, an accomplished fact. The country forms a signal illustration of the triumph of mind over matter. This fine flying in the face of providence, this great spiritual achievement, deserves more emphasis and analysis than it has hitherto received.

Natural forces have conditioned our history at every point. The sea has united the Maritime Provinces with New England, not with the upper provinces. The St. Lawrence Valley has yoked Ontario and Quebec together in an uneasy partnership. The Canadian Shield has separated both from the west. These are familiar remarks but despite their familiarity, the facts which lie behind them have not been investigated as fully as their importance warrants. They are neglected aspects of our history. We have for example, no full-length study of the relations of New England and the Maritimes and only an occasional rather sketchy monograph on the St. Lawrence Valley. We have no attempt, so far as the writer knows, to assess the influence of the climate on this transplanted section of the European race, though that influence must have been profound. Has it tended to make us introspective as the Russians are sometimes said to have been made by theirs, a similar one? Has it, together with the uncertainty of our economic life, itself a reflection of climate and physiography, had anything to do with our chronic hectic optimism which is always looking so eagerly for mere prosperity and which causes us to interpret life from so stark a materialistic standpoint? Do our natural surroundings, the omnipresence of the wilderness and the resulting scantiness of population, explain the pre-occupation of our poetry and our art with nature rather than with man? These are questions worth trying to answer.

Fashions in history change as they in other matters. The old 'drum and trumpet' history has gone. The great ones of the earth are no longer the only fit subjects for discussion. The worship of the 'common man' as an object of study is upon us. While the study of the common or common-place man, if overdone, would no doubt make for common-place history, yet in a country such as this, which is a monument to his obscure labours, he might well receive a certain measure of attention. What man-

ner of man is our 'common man'? Where did he come from and how did he get here? We have a few studies on immigration but none as yet which have reached to the heart of the problem—and indeed it will prove a difficult matter to do so. It is easy enough to compile a history of the public policy as to immigration, to write about the ocean crossing or the journey up country. It is fairly easy to trace the rise and progress (or the lack thereof) of the settlements in which government assistance played a part. But it is not easy to get at the character of our original population *en masse*, to discover what proportion came from Ireland or from Scotland, how great a leaven the Loyalist strain has been, how much of the growth of population has been due to immigration, how much to natural increase and things of that sort. We are not informed in any systematic way on the social status of our pioneers. Some, such as certain of the Loyalists, were substantial and cultured men, others were paupers. These things we know because they stand out, but what was the "average" man? From the character of our people to-day we can guess shrewdly but we must chiefly guess.

There is in print a wealth of meticulous detail lying ready for the person who can paint a picture from it. Local histories are as the sand on the sea shore. As history most of them are very bad, though there are honourable exceptions, but as storehouses of facts that would otherwise be most inaccessible, they are valuable. Some day they will provide raw material for the writer gifted with power to distil the essence of the commonplace and to show us how a people grows.

Much has been written about the picturesque side of pioneer days. Everyone knows that the settler, leaving wife and children in a rude log cabin, was accustomed to trudge through the almost pathless woods for many miles with a heavy sack of wheat upon his back, and so on. But the general principles which underlay the whole process have not as yet been much canvassed. Has there been a frontier psychology in Canada as there was in the United States? Was the attack on the wilderness methodical despite its seeming confusion? Did certain classes of persons take upon themselves certain classes of work? Maria Chapdelaine's father with his self-appointed task of clearing a farm and then moving on again to the wilderness to do the same thing over again represented a type whose existence was well-defined on the American frontier. Did it exist in Canada? Hémon's novel is one bit of evidence showing that it did. There are doubtless others which would establish the point. Did the newly arrived push on out to the frontier or did the biologic law of dispersion hold good, that law which teaches that it is the edge which moves and the old ground that is occupied by later comers?

In the United States, the innate genius of the Anglo-Saxon for self-government was illustrated over and over again as the frontier rolled westward by innumerable duplications of the Mayflower compact. Did anything of the sort occur in Canada or did government tread so closely on the heels of the settler that local arrangements were not necessary? If so, what has been the effect on our population of the orderliness of our development? Has it robbed us of some initiative? Or is our cautiousness a racial trait, to hazard a guess, Scottish in origin?

Both in Canada and the United States, democracy has been a condition, not a theory. It has been the spontaneous product of the frontier and the forest. In both countries it has had its battle to fight with the representatives of an older order of things. In the United States it had to

contend with the propertied classes of the east and in Canada with propertied and privileged family compacts. Of the two survivals of aristocracy, the Canadian version was probably the more invidious and certainly the more petty. Not long after Andrew Jackson scored his ringing victory of 1828, Mackenzie led his guerilla raid against a foe akin to his. While other champions of the new order duly appeared, its victory in Canada was not as complete as in the United States and as a result there has always been an aristocratic tinge to our politics—or at least to our political system—not observable in those of the republic. Even if we would—which God forbid!—we could not have a party convention such as the Democrats held in 1924.

Leadership and direction, the "tone" of life, have in Canada, tended to come from above, that is, directly or indirectly from English aristocratic tradition, the Americans, on the other hand, while not exactly getting these things from below, have at least made them up as they went along. The result is a fairly considerable difference in the political and social atmosphere of the two countries, a difference which has been reflected in laws and institutions. In Canada, for example, democratic theory has never gone to such extreme limits as to bring about universal municipal suffrage and to-day, in most provinces, only ratepayers may vote on money by-laws. In the United States, the elected council reigns supreme again, it has been much easier to "close" a profession in Canada than in the United States, which land in these matters has acted rather consistently on its principles of equality. Here is a field, the nice balance between the natural tendencies of a new community and its inherited influences, which could be richly worked.

The formal constitutional or legal aspects of the evolution of self-government have not lacked expositors, its less tangible features have. The significance of the broadening of the franchise has not had much attention. What type of men have we had as our representatives in Assembly and Parliament, as our mayors and our sheriffs? Has there been a change in their type as we have become more and more of a democracy? What has been the nature of that part of the organization of our politics which is not designed to meet the eye, the internal economy of parties? How have candidates for election been chosen? Have they been selected by vulgar bosses as often they are in the United States or by very respectable ones (there is a temptation to add 'such as Sir Francis Head')? Or have they frequently selected themselves? Have we anywhere in Canada a vehicle for the expression of public opinion equal in efficacy to the New England town meeting in its best days? Why, incidentally, did the New England 'town' not spread to pre-Revolutionary Nova Scotia?

The republic, whose influence has been so obvious everywhere in Canada, has probably also influenced the structure of our politics. These obscure forces might well be investigated.<sup>1</sup> And the investigation might well go beyond political influences. Our civilization, using the term in a wide sense to mean our total inherited collection of ideas, customs, habits of life, modes of thought and so forth, has been derived principally from two sources, Great Britain and France, and the British source has been split into two halves, according as it came directly from Great Britain or indirectly through the United States. These two halves have never been clearly differentiated. By way of illustration:—it will readily be granted that the average Canadian is endowed with a fairly acute conscience in moral matters—the *Canadian Forum* has been accusing us lately of being

a nation of 'eminently respectable' people—but is his conscience a "New England conscience or a Nonconformist conscience"? The two grow from a common root, it is true, but in some respects time and place have differentiated them. Which do we share or do we possess both?

Again does the attention we pay to education in Canada come from the influential Scottish strain in our blood, is it an echo of New England and the Puritans or is it a product of local conditions?

To take the question of religion. It might be presumed that a country settled by Englishmen from the two ends of society rather than from the middle and by Scots and Ulstermen would be outstandingly Anglican or Presbyterian, whereas it is not, but if outstandingly anything, is—or was until lately—Methodist. Does the explanation lie in the influence of the circuit rider from the south, that insidious 'Yankee' of a century ago who was like to wrest the country from Great Britain by converting it to Methodism<sup>1</sup> or was the local circumstance the explanation, the conjunction with an emotional and exuberant religion of pioneer gloom and loneliness seeking emotional relief in any direction possible?

Whatever the explanations for these and similar phenomena, they are worth while seeking.

An analysis of cultural conditions would have to face the question as to whether anything has originated on the spot. Most persons would name the idea of a federation within an empire as a distinctive Canadian contribution to the science of government. Perhaps there are others in other spheres. In religion there is the unique union lately consummated of three Protestant churches. Such a frank facing of reality in a field which prejudice has usually reserved for its own must argue something original in our way of looking at life. It is comparable to another equally clear-sighted attitude in quite a different department of human activity, the co-operative ability shown by our western farmers. Such things give ground for hoping that in our own way we are contributing to the general stock of human wisdom.

But into such a contribution, natural conditions again enter. Canadians must admit that they are on the circumference, not at the centre of the white world's cultural area. Many of the great, formative ideas of that world have been literally 'made in Germany' or in some other European country. Thence they have travelled across the sea—the influence of Locke on the Virginia planters and hence on the American Revolution is a good example—and have slowly taken root in new surroundings. Very often they have come to Canada after a preliminary period of acclimatization and thus by a second remove from their point of origin. To return to the field of religion again, Methodism, if not a profound philosophy, at least a great social force, is a case in point. This slow and indirect penetration of ideas was especially true in a past of rudimentary communications. Cultures spread themselves very much like animals or plants, it seems, and the ideas or problems which agitate the centre today, pass away from it, to be replaced by new ones and to agitate the frontier tomorrow. Tennessee, for instance, is just discovering Darwin. Shall we in Canada always be situated close to the cultural frontier and will parts of the country always be further away from that frontier than others? Montreal is sometimes said to be spiritually as well as geographically nearer London than Toronto. Will it always be so? Is it easier and will it continue to

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<sup>1</sup> An occasional letter of Bishop MacDonell gives the impression that he feared some such result.

be easier for a new idea to reach Winnipeg over the open vastness of the continental plains than for it to cross the lakes to Toronto? An examination of what has happened in the past might elucidate the point.

Apart from abstractions, there are many concrete problems still to be looked into. Our relationship with the United States offers many of them. Within the last generation, Americans and Englishmen have largely rewritten the history of the American Revolution. It would be interesting to have a thorough analysis of it by a Canadian.<sup>2</sup> In particular, the treaty of 1783 which was to affect our future so profoundly is worth a study. So also is the treaty of Washington of 1871. So far, we have left most of these things to others.

Many monographs are needed on the economic side of our history. The place of New France in the French mercantile system, its relations with the French West Indies and the French conception of Empire from the commercial side, all these would repay scrutiny—scrutiny which might result in a series of studies as admirable as those of George Louis Beer on British colonial policy.

The same holds good of British North America in the post-Revolutionary mercantile system. The period after 1883 has been rather minutely examined by writers such as Egerton and the Americans Mahan, Morison and Bemis, and the period of 1840's has also had considerable attention paid to it. The effects of trade regulation on the colonies in the years between these two periods, their reactions to the Imperial system and the methods of its application, are however, comparatively neglected.

The industrial fabric of the country requires many special studies. We have monographs on iron and steel and on shipping. Others are in preparation on fur and lumbering. Still others could be undertaken. Pioneer agriculture, the wheat trade, the fisheries, the beginnings of manufacturing, all these could be looked into.

Compared with older or larger countries Canada has not a great depth of history. It is not at all uncommon to find people from the other side of the Atlantic who are surprised to learn that she has any history at all. The land whose annals are few is said to be happy and judged by that criterion, Canada may be held to be relatively fortunate. But if the stage has been small in the past it is one day going to be larger and it is the duty of the historian to conserve for the future everything which will throw light on how that future came to be. In the case of Canada it is probably possible to pass on almost a complete explanation. Records are very abundant and the period over which they extend is not very long. Of few other countries is this true.

Unfortunately the amount of valuable work which sees the light of day is small in comparison with what is being done. Anyone who will take the trouble to read through the annual lists of studies relating to Canada being undertaken at our Universities and those of the United States and other countries—mainly by Canadians—will be likely to get the feeling that in a few years there will be little left to write about. Unfortunately, few of these are ever published. They remain in manuscript, buried in libraries. The persons who undertook them go out into active life and develop other interests. When, as is often the case, the authors remain in the United States, they must perforce read and produce in other fields, for there is little bread and butter in Canadian history south of the border.

<sup>2</sup> It is understood that such a discussion is in fact at present in preparation by the dean of our historians.

They give their first youthful enthusiasm to the study of the history of their own country, then depart from it, probably forever. It is a pity. It opens up the apparently insoluble problem of the utilization of our own brains in our own service.

There does not seem any inherent obstacle, however, preventing use being made of the work actually done. More of it should be published. It is admittedly hard to get a commercial publisher to undertake an academic treatise but surely means might be found for printing the best of those that are written.<sup>3</sup> There is plenty of money in Canada if it can only be got at. Historians might pursue less worthy objects than devising means of getting at it.

It is conceivable that were funds available for copious publication, we might within a generation or so, have a body of historical writing that would shed light on almost every angle of our development. Neither scholarship or historical materials are lacking. If that day ever arrives, we shall have come near to doing something which few other peoples have it in their power to do, something which is the historian's ideal, presented to the world a complete synopsis of social and national development.

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<sup>3</sup> Despite some unfortunate selections, McGill University is to be commended for its efforts in this direction.