

The Renaissance of Ontario History

R. T. Clippingdale

Volume 8, Number 1, Autumn 1978

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad8_1rv04

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Clippingdale, R. T. (1978). Review of [The Renaissance of Ontario History]. *Acadiensis*, 8(1), 121–125.

The Renaissance of Ontario History

Recently, Ramsay Cook warned us not to be carried away by regionalism, not to avoid or ignore important themes just because they could not be fitted neatly into one or other of our larger "limited identities".¹ This was sound advice, but it will be some time yet perhaps before historians of post-Confederation Ontario need to give it priority attention. While regional historical scholarship on the Maritimes, Quebec and the West has been going from strength to strength, pretty much replacing the old national focus, historians in and of Ontario have taken much longer to turn in a major way to study their own provincial community's past. In the later 1970s, however, an important change has occurred. With the developing challenges of the 1960s and 1970s to Confederation as it used to be, with the new self-assertion of so many non-Ontario communities, the old confidence of Ontarians — especially the historians among them — that Canadian history was that of Ontario (or even of Toronto) writ large has crumbled. In the new collage of Canadian identities there is an urgent need for pictures representative of Ontario's particular experience. This identity question has combined with the hunger of members of the over-populated Canadian history profession in Ontario to find gainful employment in new and fruitful fields to produce an explosion of activity.

"Explosion" is certainly the right word to describe the work now under way, principally under the aegis of the Ontario Historical Studies Series.² Projects range from full-scale biographies of the major premiers through specialized volumes on social, economic and cultural history to a general synthesis further down the road. While post-Confederation themes and subjects probably will dominate the series, 1867 will not be a restrictive beginning point. Maurice Careless has prepared a manuscript on the pre-Confederation premiers; Douglas McCalla is working on economic history from 1791 to 1870; Susan Houston and Alison Prentice will cover elementary and secondary education over about the same time period; and Sydney Wise will have a volume on "Conservatism in Upper Canada". There are plans, as yet unspecific, for studies on the Indian people of Ontario. The works in the series commissioned so far are so numerous — numbering almost thirty — that full details would be inappropriate here. But a growth industry surely has appeared! It is especially encouraging that so many of the most respected and experienced Canadian historians from Ontario are represented in the roster of authors.

1 "The Burden of Regionalism", *Acadiensis*, VII (Autumn, 1977), pp. 110-4.

2 *Annual Report of the Board of Trustees of the Ontario Historical Studies Series* (Ministry of Culture and Recreation, August, 1977).

No doubt the Ontario government's original aim in promoting the series was to give the province's premiers — and its politics generally — a place in the sun. This was by no means an unworthy objective, although the immense broadening of the scope of the project was essential if it was to avoid an old-fashioned image in this era of more sophisticated approaches to history. But the near-surfeit of existing biographies on major federal political figures is not matched in the Ontario field. In fact, Peter Oliver's *Howard Ferguson: Ontario Tory* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1977), the initial OHS Series volume to be published, is the first truly comprehensive modern scholarly study of an Ontario premier to appear in book form. Political biography may be, in many eyes, rather old hat; but without it reference points for anything remotely touching on politics are frustratingly hard to come by.

The OHS Series is supposed to be aimed — at least in the eyes of the fund givers — at the “intelligent general reader”. Fair enough, although historians of any field know how difficult it is to combine that objective with truly stimulating new scholarship. However, biography at its best has been peculiarly the place of intersection for the literary and scholarly talents of some of the finest historians. Generally, the best biographies have had subjects of exceptional human interest, and they have succeeded as artistic portraits because only an essential minimum of detailed “times” material has intruded on the central focus of a fascinating “life”. Howard Ferguson was an interesting, even colourful man, but hardly exceptionally charming, intelligent or enigmatic. To make Oliver's task even more formidable, he cannot just assume his readers' knowledge of the general political, social or economic outlines of Ontario life during Ferguson's heyday, especially in the 1920s. Hardly any literature exists on these subjects — so he has to give them detailed attention. But while the book is rather too long and detailed for the best purely biographical success, it is a fascinating study, which will set a high standard for the other premiers' lives to follow. The social and intellectual environment of the province is traced with considerable skill. Bilingual schools, prohibition, resource development and rural-urban differences are among the questions to which particular attention is given. The complex Ontario relationship with the federal authority, especially in the St. Lawrence hydro field, is thoroughly treated, and provides a welcome balance to the centralist bias of most existing accounts.

Howard Ferguson was a fire-brand on the deplorably divisive bilingual schools issue before World War One. The belligerent boy from eastern Ontario's Protestant, long-settled and terrifically Tory Kemptville absorbed quite naturally anti-French, anti-Catholic and imperialist emotions. Oliver portrays sensitively the Kemptvillites' point of view: “To such people, Bourassian ideals of dualism were utterly foreign, while Bourassa's opposition to imperialism could only be regarded as an attack on much of what they held dear. There was as yet nothing in the Ontario experience which could

render comprehensible to its people the idea of bilingualism or of a compact of Confederation” They “remembered the struggle between French and English in the west and believed the decision taken there had been the only possible one if some kind of polyglot nation were to be avoided” (pp. 45-6). Oliver may be generalizing too sweepingly about Ontarians here, but it is important for readers of Canadian history to realize that beyond the little imperialist intellectual elite Carl Berger has written about, there was a broadly based popular imperialism and “one Canada” feeling in the province, compelling the healthy respect of politicians. As Sam Hughes once put it, there were always “the boys” out there.

Ferguson handled the lands, forests and mines portfolio during World War One with evident skill, but also very clearly in the interests of the Conservative party’s patronage and power interests. He became symbolic to idealistic United Farmer opponents in 1919 of the worst of the old politics. Still, when the Tories fell before the UFO crusade in 1919, they turned in desperation to their toughest political pro for leadership. He delivered, destroying the Farmers in 1923 and then piling up enormous landslides in 1926 and 1929.

In this book, and in the earlier collection of his essays, *Public and Private Persons: The Ontario Political Culture, 1914-1934* (Toronto, Clarke, Irwin & Company, 1975), almost a companion volume to the biography, Oliver is very hard on the poor UFO’ers, pointing out the inappropriateness of their moral crusading for post-war Ontario once it settled down into prosperity. His detailed treatment in the anthology of the clumsiness and stubbornness of Premier E. C. Drury during the humiliating Jarvis-Smith scandal does not do the Farmer Premier’s reputation any good. Oliver also paints Ferguson on occasion in unflattering tones, but it may be that he has been so immersed in sources on the Tories’ side that he does not permit their opponents the same complexity of motivations he allows them. We are given chapter and verse on the failure of the Farmers’ “moral uplift” approach, especially to prohibition; and the Liberals are treated as “a study in political collapse” (pp. 64-91, 126-155). With biographies of Drury and comprehensive political histories on a broad scale should come a more rounded handling of the Ferguson years. Valuable and commendable though Oliver’s scholarship clearly is, it should not type Ontario’s political history of that era as pre-determinedly Tory, as the Mackenzie King industry has done for the Liberals in federal politics from the 1920s through the 1940s.

For all Ferguson’s extreme partisanship and his fondness on occasion for taking the low road in his attacks on opponents — he often boasted of nailing their ‘hides’ to his fencepost — he had some significant achievements as premier. Two in particular reflected his capacity to harmonize conflicting elements in the province’s life. He “settled” the liquor issue, through the easing out of the unenforcable prohibition laws into the more flexible regu-

latory approach, with restrictions and local options to console the still powerful "drys". Even more impressive was his ability to cool off the troubled bilingual schools problem, winning commendations by 1927 from Franco-Ontarians, Orangemen and the Premier of Quebec!

We learn a great deal in the biography about the preferences of Ontarians in the 1920s concerning educational, social and business practices. The resistance of the plethora of little local school boards to Ferguson's efforts at producing improved efficiency and economy through regional units is fascinating. We can see too that Ontario's welfare and health systems of that day were utterly inadequate, and that the exploitation of forests and minerals required more regulation and far better rationalization. But Ferguson, along with most of the voters to whom he appealed, was content with the province more or less as it was. Although adaptable when the need clearly arose for administrative or legislative moves which would restore stability and reasonable harmony in society, he was a fundamentally conservative man. Majority Ontario in its pre-Depression prosperity had a fitting leader.

Ferguson was a figure of a particular time and an identifiably Protestant Anglo Saxon "Old Ontario" background. There are and have been many Ontarios. It is a pluralistic province. However conservative its majority politics from Upper Canadian times to the present day, there has always been a progressive strain as well. In Donald C. MacDonald's uneven collection of essays, most of them pretty presentist, called *Government and Politics of Ontario* (Toronto, Macmillan of Canada, 1975), there is also the reminder by Don Scott, in his article on "Northern Alienation", of the profound divisions and tensions which have existed in and concerning that region: "It is here that eastern Canada meets alienated French Canada. It is here that the Indian suffers a silent alienation within sight of a standard of living far above his own. It is here that a colonial industrial system functions with an alienated work force" (p. 247). For the most part the MacDonald book hardly fits an historian's prescription of desirable history, even of a contemporary nature. Some of the articles — for example, on the Progressive Conservative provincial leadership convention of 1971 — are pure narrative reports on a simplistic and superficial level, without any serious effort to provide more than a re-hash of what was evident at the time from the TV coverage. Jonathan Manthorpe in *The Power and the Tories: Ontario Politics — 1943 to the Present* (Toronto, Macmillan of Canada, 1974) at least used behind-the-scenes sources, sometimes very effectively, although he had little of note to offer on anything before his own time at Queen's Park. We await the forthcoming biographies of George Drew, Leslie Frost and John Robarts for something seriously scholarly on the pre-Davis Progressive Conservative reign in Ontario. And there is a crying need for detailed work on the Liberals and the CCF-NDP during those years.

In Oliver Mowat's day the province was called "Empire Ontario". In this

century, it is undeniably a nation-sized community rich in diversity and interest. The Ontario Historical Studies Series has come along at a time when thanks to changes in Ontarians' own view of themselves and the appearance of fine works like H. V. Nelles' *The Politics of Development: Forests, Mines, and Hydro-Electric Power* (Toronto, Macmillan of Canada, 1974), and Margaret Prang's *Newton W. Rowell, Ontario Nationalist* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1975), a clear trend already exists towards a new vogue for Ontario history. Gone soon will be the image, too often deserved, that historians of Ontario were interested primarily in local studies or time long ago. There is nothing the matter with either pursuit, of course, and increasingly sophisticated work in both local history and pre-Confederation times will undoubtedly complement the new regional and modern trend. No one will be surprised if a lot of trash or near trash — certainly a good deal of trivia — is produced as the new Ontario history moves into the next stages of growth. But Peter Oliver's very welcome and worthwhile study of Howard Ferguson and his times is a harbinger of good things to come. Could it be that Ontario is about to *dominate* regional history in Canada, causing a new burden on our unity, especially at the meeting each June of the Canadian Historical Association?

R. T. CLIPPINGDALE

Recent Studies in the History of Canadian External Affairs

To students in the developing field of Canadian external relations, new publications are most welcome. The literature is not overwhelming in volume or in quality and additions to it are gratifying, even if they only complement existing bibliography. For example, a new survey of the sort that presents foreign relations in the full round — not simply Canadian-American or simply imperial — is long overdue. It is to be hoped that C. P. Stacey's book, the first of two intended volumes, *Canada and the Age of Conflict: A History of Canadian Policies, Volume I, 1867 - 1921* (Toronto, Macmillan of Canada, 1977) will satisfy that need. The title of Professor Stacey's book is somewhat confusing. (One cannot be sure just what conflict or conflicts the author had in mind.) As the sub-title indicates, however, it is a study of Canada's foreign relations from the dawn of Confederation to the appearance of Mackenzie King. C. P. Stacey is a master craftsman, Canada's premier military historian, indeed one of the best regardless of the company he keeps. His first publication, *Canada and the British Army, 1847 - 1871*, was a model monograph; his little book, *Quebec 1759: The Siege and the Battle*, was a gem. He has written many other works and composed numerous essays, articles and addresses.