

The Limits of History

John English

Volume 15, Number 2, Spring 1986

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad15_2rv01

[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 document

English, J. (1986). The Limits of History. *Acadiensis*, 15(2), 144–149.

Reviews/Revue

The Limits of History

MANY YEARS AGO R.G. COLLINGWOOD set out to discover why Hadrian's wall was built. He used his historical imagination to identify the problems of construction which the Roman engineers confronted, — he became in his mind a Roman engineer — and in doing so, he greatly revised earlier scholarship. His empathetic method was described in his classic study, *The Idea of History*:

The historian of politics or warfare, presented with an account of certain actions done by Julius Caesar, tries to understand these actions, that is, to discover what thoughts in Caesar's mind determined him to do them. This implies envisaging for himself the situation in which Caesar stood, and thinking for himself what Caesar thought about the situation and the possible ways of dealing with it. The history of thought, and therefore all history, is the re-enactment of past thought in the historian's mind.¹

In various ways, Peter Waite's *The Man from Halifax: Sir John Thompson, Prime Minister* (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1985) and Sandra Gwyn's *The Private Capital: Ambition and Love in the Age of Macdonald and Laurier* (McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, 1984) attempt to enter the mind of persons and of a time. Gwyn, in fact, explicitly asks the reader to follow her on imaginative journeys where the documentary evidence has left few guideposts. Their approaches reflect their training and, in particular, their use of historical evidence. The differences between the books are significant in illuminating both the limits which professional historians accept and the impact of these limits upon their work.

Peter Waite, like John Thompson, is a man from Halifax, and he knows both the city and the man well. He has spent more than a decade on the Thompson project, sifting through archival materials in Canada, Britain, and the United States, and, as Collingwood urged, thinking for himself about what Thompson thought and sensed. He takes exceptional care to get everything right. The explanatory footnotes dealing with Thompson's birth and birthplace and with his death reveal how careful Waite has been. The report in the *New York World* of 16 December 1894, repeated in the *Empire* the following day, which suggested that the court ceremony preceding Thompson's death was excessively long, is exposed by Waite as a *canard*: "Thompson's invitation says 1:15 for the commencement; he was sworn in, according to the court circular at 1:30 p.m. he was at lunch by about 1:35" (p. 521). To this great attention to detail, some may respond who cares? The answer, obviously, is that John Thompson would have, Annie Thompson did, and so must Peter Waite. It is all a part of getting it right, seeing the small dabs which are largely obscured by the broad brush strokes.

¹ R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York, 1956), p. 215. I would like to thank Irene Sage Knell for her research assistance.

The broad strokes of Canadian historians have portrayed Thompson as a politician of unusual principle and of considerable intelligence. The former is exemplified by his conversion to Catholicism at a time when such a conversion was thought to bear large political and social costs. Waite, however, suggests that the costs were much lower than might have been expected. Indeed, in terms of constituency political support, it brought him real benefits.² He also emphasizes that the decision was Thompson's alone, one which he brooded over for several years before he met and married the Catholic Annie Affleck. Although he converted nine months after marrying Annie, Thompson always maintained — and Waite agrees — that the decision was probably inevitable whatever the circumstances. Thompson, it seems, wanted the security, the rich tradition, and the intellectual rigour of Roman Catholicism in the 1870s. Like that faith, Thompson was complicated, and he also demanded and gave much of himself. These qualities were noticed in the relatively enclosed legal-political circles of late 19th century Nova Scotia, and they are commemorated in Waite's study.

Thompson, Waite writes of his accession to the office of Nova Scotia's attorney-general, "brought to the office energy, probity, intelligence, and courtesy". It was, he continues, "a constellation sufficiently rare everywhere and unique in Nova Scotia" (p. 89). This is, perhaps, too strong. Could not the same be said of Thompson's colleague Robert Borden? Nevertheless, the combination was insufficient in itself to raise Thompson to the top. It was here that Annie played a key role. Thompson's instincts were "conservative, pedestrian, unadventurous". Annie, by contrast, "had her sights on distant horizons". She was "bolder, more reckless, altogether a high-mettled creature" (p. 59). At crucial points in his career Thompson followed her urgings towards these distant horizons which his own pusillanimity resisted. Their differences created difficulties, but their relationship endured.

The relationship between Annie and John Thompson can be sketched in unusual detail, for the Thompson family correspondence is probably richer than that which survives for any other prime ministerial family. What kind of portrait of this marriage emerges? Their mutual interest in politics is abundantly clear. Annie could not vote, but she definitely had influence upon her husband and her political feelings were stronger than his. In his letters to his wife, Thompson does illuminate what went on behind the stage and Annie certainly gives advice on how the players should be arranged. She also feels free to criticize her husband, to chide him ever so gently for his hesitations and fears. They wrote constantly: on 4 December 1884, Annie wrote three times to Thompson, a "cross" letter in the morning, an apology at mid-day, and a 12-page letter in the evening

2 Thompson ran as an outsider in an Antigonish by-election in 1877. There was naturally local resentment although the church was strongly behind him. Bishop Cameron intervened to persuade a local opponent to withdraw. Over his career, the help continued. Thompson was perceived as a "Catholic candidate". This did close some doors to him, but fewer than some have suggested. It opened a few others very wide.

which ended with "Goodby kitten such I am the torment of your life, Annie" (p. 156).

The greatest torments were their separations, which were frequent and long. For Thompson, his home was a haven in a heartless world. One becomes conscious of the tensions between this kind of domestic life and the public life which Thompson lived. The strains between public and private show, and they were stitched together by a romanticism which, as G.M. Young pointed out about Victorians long ago, served to restrain rather than express their troubled and fiery souls.³ So much had to be forgotten or avoided. Annie had nine pregnancies, but only five children lived. In one stretch between 1878 and 1883, she was pregnant five times, but of these children only two lived. Money was always tight, and Thompson, unlike Tupper and so many others, resisted the temptation to use his position to assure his family's security. Illness was constant, death a frequent visitor. Through it all, the sense of duty prevailed. During an impecunious 1892, while a daughter ailed, Annie personally cooked dinner for 250 guests during the parliamentary session. Both Annie and John accepted the conventions of their day and entertaining well was simply one of them.

Peter Waite accepts these conventions too and does not probe too deeply for what lies beneath them. Nor, thankfully, does he mock them. There is no attempt to use a Freudian prism to see what these conventions might imply in psychological terms. There is some sex, such as in his description of Tupper's philandering and of Thompson and Annie wondering about the date of her period, an inquiry expressed in a bashful code. Yet the book reflects the time. Waite lets the reader feel what they did.

Waite also accepts the conventions of his craft. He uses evidence carefully, and is unwilling to go far beyond the evidence into speculation, no matter how well-informed he is. This book also can be well-appreciated by those who, like Waite, are familiar with literary culture. The text abounds with references to the classics, to Victorian literature, and to literary tradition. Waite is one of Canada's finest stylists, but the book's pleasures will be confined to the few who can savour them: his professional colleagues and that most unusual specimen, the well-informed general reader. Contrasting Waite's *Thompson* with Donald Creighton's biography of Macdonald, one is struck by how much less latitude to approach a popular audience the contemporary professional historian now has. There are lots of good stories in *Thompson*, but they are cloaked thoroughly in the fiery of academic scholarship which serves to suppress titillation. By contrast, Sandra Gwyn's *The Private Capital* strips off academic raiments and gets the most mileage from every story.

The Private Capital is written for a general audience, and it has certainly found one. It won the 1984 Governor General's award for English non-fiction. The book is extremely attractive, with excellent reproductions of contemporary photographs. Even at \$34.95, it is a bargain. Moreover, Gwyn writes remark-

3 G.M. Young, *Victorian England: Portrait of an Age* (Garden City, N.Y., 1954), Ch. 18.

ably lucid prose and has a wonderful sense of the appropriate anecdote. In short, the book is a delight to read, and many who care little and know nothing about the age of Macdonald and Laurier will enjoy it.

Gwyn's book is best described as accessible. Its accessibility is the product of her language, which although elegant is mostly conversational, her allusions, which are rarely ones which a general reader would not know, and her playfulness, which takes her beyond the boundaries which an academic historian would honour. She speculates freely about what was going on in the minds of her major figures, and embroiders her research with a flourish of adjectives and active verbs. Here is a typical passage:

As Edmund Meredith walked home from City Hall to Sandy Hill on June 14, 1879, it was not only because the founding meeting of the Art Association had gone so swimmingly that he stepped along with a spring in his stride and a sparkle in his eye. Some of his good cheer flowed from the fact that two days earlier, when he had arrived home from a garden party organized by Lady Macdonald in aid of St. Alban's Church, his daughter had come rushing to meet him at the front door and had pressed a letter with a London postmark into his hand (p. 215).

Meredith kept a diary but how do we know that his stride had a spring and his eye had a sparkle or that Mary "rushed" to the front door and "pressed" a letter into his hand? These things probably did occur, and it would be niggardly to fuss about this.

Nevertheless, what this passage suggests is that Gwyn's approach is closer to imaginative literature than to academic history. To be sure, she has done considerable research in archives and has read widely in the secondary literature. Nevertheless, the sources are not attributed, and the secondary works upon which she relies form a rather idiosyncratic list. Despite the broad approach suggested by the book's subtitle, the focus is often narrow and is dictated by the liveliness of her sources. For example, Agar Adamson and Edmund Meredith loom much larger in *The Private Capital* than do John Thompson and Robert Borden. Maritimers generally are on the sidelines in *The Private Capital* although many were certainly at the centre of Ottawa's public life. I suspect this accurately reflects social life which centred so much around Government House and which appealed far more to Upper Canadian, recent British immigrant, and even upper class French Canadian tastes than it did to Maritimers.

Gwyn's purposes and methods are, in many ways, more similar to Timothy Findley's in *The Wars* (1977) than to Peter Waite's in *The Man from Halifax*. Like Findley, she sees Canada's past through the prism of a modern sensibility. There is a great deal she illuminates that we had not noticed, for her imaginative powers are great. As with Findley, Gwyn's generosity of vision makes her characters resonate with an emotional life that seems familiar to a modern reader.

They make love and scale the greasy pole of success in ways all of us can recognize.

But should the recognition come so easily? A modern poet has written "Sexual intercourse/Began in 1962". Literally, this is untrue, but in another sense its truth is obvious and profound. Gwyn, it seems to me, obscures the very real differences between love today and then. There are many differences: they almost never divorced; they had larger families; they had less mobility; and their social conventions placed large barriers in the way of physical contact between males and females who were not married to each other.⁴ There were neither pills nor IUDs, and bearing illegitimate children was not only deemed morally outrageous but also brought all the attendant risks of Victorian childbirth. Gwyn cites Cynthia Asquith's diary at one point to suggest that Edwardian women had a new sexual freedom. Nevertheless a close reading of that diary suggests how tentative were the approaches towards that freedom even in the far more liberal atmosphere of London.⁵

The love affair between Laurier and Emilie Lavergne is the centrepiece of this book and has attracted the most attention. Gwyn accepts Marc LaTerreur's view that sexual intercourse probably did not take place, but she does so most reluctantly and the publicity agents for her publishers have entirely ignored these doubts. Surely, however, what is interesting about the liaison was the fact that there was no intercourse. In striving to explain Emilie's appeal to Laurier, Gwyn goes too far, making Laurier into a country bumpkin whose rough edges were hewn into courtly elegance through the careful sculpting of Emilie. This is not the Laurier of the 1870s whom historians know so well — Laurier, the valedictorian of McGill and the author of a remarkable speech on political liberalism which revealed a deep understanding of the historical and philosophical underpinnings of the British version of that creed. To suggest that Emilie schooled Laurier in British ways or, for that matter, the English language is preposterous. Gwyn should have relied upon O.D. Skelton's partisan but highly perceptive biography rather than Joseph Schull's more recent but more pedestrian effort.

In a broader sense, I suspect that Gwyn makes too much of Ottawa before 1914. As one reads through *The Private Capital*, the lumber town on the Rideau moves even farther away and a cosmopolitan, affluent, literary, and even sophisticated social and cultural life emerges. It would be easy to criticize the book for omitting the rough and hard life of lowertown which endured well into the 20th century, but such a criticism would be unfair because Gwyn has explicitly focused on that elite which she finds a far more modern and sophisticated lot than we would ever have believed. She has found great loves, balls, literary salons, emotional poets and many of the other accoutrements of life that one

4 See Gwyn's account of the thoroughly unmodern fears of Lord Minto and his friend Lola Powell, *The Private Capital*, pp. 309-10.

5 See Lady Cynthia Asquith, *Diaries 1915-1918* (New York, 1969).

found then in London, New York, or even Paris.

There were, of course, linkages. Emilie had met Victor Hugo, Belle Scott had studied piano in Leipzig, and Lampman and Scott were reviewed in New York and Boston along with the great names of the age. Nevertheless, there are many hints that Ottawa was a drearier and more limited place than Gwyn's lively narrative suggests. When Rupert Brooke visited Duncan Campbell Scott in 1913, he described the meeting to the British poet Wilfrid Gibson:

The only poet in Canada was very nice to me....Poor devil, he's so lonely and died there: no one to talk to....Canada's a *bloody* place for a sensitive — in a way 2nd rate real, slight poet like that to live all his life.⁶

A bit harsh perhaps, but Brooke's comments do suggest Ottawa lacked the verve that animates *The Private Capital*. Scott would have enjoyed Gwyn's Ottawa, but I suspect that his Ottawa was really closer to Brooke's than Gwyn's version. For an historian, Ottawa's limits and its nervousness are as interesting as its links with the modern world.

Ottawa in 1913 was far from what we know as modern. In 1913 when Brooke called on Scott, it was not in Paris or even New York but in St. Petersburg that Kasimir Malevich and a group of Russian avant-garde artists produced an astonishing non-logical, abstract opera which would be far more familiar to the Ottawa cultural community today than would the forms of cultural life found in Ottawa in 1913.⁷ One might complain that despite its poverty and its distance from Paris, St. Petersburg was a world capital and that comparison with the still-colonial Ottawa is unfair. The complaint is unfounded for Malevich and his colleagues had found their inspiration in a futurist conference which had taken place in Helsinki, which surely was another distant and cold colonial capital, even if its cultural milieu in 1913 was closer to what we know today than was Ottawa in 1913.

Waite, following Collingwood, has seen Ottawa through the eyes of John Thompson, and he encountered a Victorian world that had so many limits and that seems now so far away. Gwyn has found some parts of Ottawa which historians have avoided. Nevertheless, she sees the past through the prism of an Ottawa where its principal civil servant has the world's best collection of Tissot, where its finest restaurants serve the rarest wines and where its cabinet ministers survive their sexual indiscretions with remarkable ease. Gwyn's Ottawa is one we can recognize, Waite's is far away. The historian's Ottawa is apparently not one most contemporary Canadians want to recognize today.

JOHN ENGLISH

6 Quoted in *The Private Capital*, p. 465.

7 The opera was "Victory over the sun — a Futurist opera, with music by Mikhail Matyushin": Larissa Zhadova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art, 1910-1930* (New York, 1982), pp. 17, 27-8.