

George Nowlan and the Disparity of Regionalism

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mature adulthood and that work on the Maritimes has contributed to that maturation.

COLIN D. HOWELL

George Nowlan and the Disparity of Regionalism

THE NOWLAN FAMILY HAVE NO REASON to regret their choice of biographer for George Clyde Nowlan, 1898-1965. Sensitive to her subject's Maritime origins, Margaret Conrad has drawn a sympathetic, though not uncritical, portrait of the popular Conservative Member of Parliament for Digby-Annapolis-Kings. Her book, *George Nowlan: Maritime Conservative In National Politics* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1986), is also an informed and perceptive case study of the politics of regional disparity, a cause close to the heart of George Nowlan.

The Annapolis Valley, with its strong tradition of individualism, local government and congregationally governed churches, has produced more than its share of prominent Canadian politicians — Sir Frederick Borden, Sir Robert Borden, James Lorimer Ilsley — including George Clyde Nowlan, who came close to becoming Prime Minister of Canada during the turbulent last days of Diefenbaker's administration. Of the Valley's four native sons only Sir Robert Borden has received any serious scholarly attention, the man least rooted in the area. In contrast the political career of George Nowlan, born at Havelock, Digby County in 1898, of a prominent local family, active in the economic, religious and secular life of the community, was shaped by the claims of his Valley constituency, which he never outgrew.

Religion is a case in point. In Wolfville, the intellectual centre of Maritime Baptists, where the family purchased a 23 acre farm in 1911, the Nowlans became active members of the local Baptist church, increasingly under the influence of the social gospel. Here, and at Acadia University, where George Nowlan enrolled in an Arts Programme in 1915, Nowlan encountered the social gospel's call to social action, to assist society's poor and disadvantaged. In the inter-war period Nowlan not only defended the embattled liberal Baptist Convention from the assaults of its conservative, fundamentalist assailants, but he developed a more than passing interest in the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation's programme, whose social commitment seemed but a secular version of his religious sympathies, a philosophy closer to his personal inclination than the arid doctrines of his own party, stultified by political power and the Great Depression.

The Conservative Party had not always been so devoid of solutions to the region's economic ills as it appeared in the early 1930s. In 1925 Nowlan, a

Wolfville lawyer who had only recently graduated from Dalhousie's Law School (after a brief stint as a gunner in World War I), was persuaded to seek a seat in the Nova Scotia Legislature under the banner of a rejuvenated provincial Conservative Party, committed to a programme of maritime rights. Although elected to the government benches in 1925 and again in 1928, where he served as Deputy Speaker, his party's failure to implement its blueprint for regional recovery led to his and his party's defeat in 1933. Worse still, the Liberals, under the inspired and progressive leadership of Angus L. Macdonald, had confiscated much of the Conservative's social and regional programme. The provincial Conservative's defeat and the economic crisis only deepened Nowlan's frustration with the existing socio-economic structure, and the inability of the provincial Conservatives to provide answers to the pressing problems of social distress and regional disparity. In these circumstances, the left-leaning programme of the federal party, particularly after the Port Hope convention of 1942 and the subsequent election of John Bracken to the party's leadership, increasingly attracted Nowlan's interest.

Although a progressive Conservative, Nowlan's decision to seek redress of the region's grievances within the federal Conservative party imposed serious limitations upon his campaign for regional equity, especially under the subsequent, and less than progressive leadership of George Drew. At that time the Conservatives seemed little more than an Ontario party, for whom regional disparity was not a pressing priority. Nevertheless, as a party in search of a constituency, the Conservatives increasingly became "a haven for liberal democrats who had become disenchanted with the government" (p. xiv), a party in which "regional and cultural factors figured prominently in attempts to organize political alienation" (p. xiv). In "transforming" the Conservative party from being the voice "of the establishment centre to one of the protesting periphery" (p. xiv), George Nowlan played a significant part.

Even before Nowlan first entered the House of Commons in 1948, he had established his credentials as a regional spokesman. In Ottawa this phlegmatic, jovial, articulate, pragmatic politician quickly consolidated his position as a regional power broker, with easy access to the party's powerful Bay Street Barons. Although scarcely the most likely allies, or converts to his political perspective, Nowlan had no difficulty gaining their confidence, which they readily demonstrated by electing him to the party's presidency for two consecutive terms (1950-54). Ironically it was the advent of Diefenbaker to the party's leadership in 1956, a man whom neither Nowlan nor his Bay Street Baron friends particularly liked, which gave Nowlan's regional, anti-big business, anti-organized labour, anti-bureaucratic government philosophy its greatest chance of success. With a place in both camps, Nowlan was strategically located after Diefenbaker's electoral victories of 1957 and 1958 to mediate between the party's competing factions. In fact he played the role of mediator so well that some of the party's conspirators saw him as the most plausible interim

leader to heal the party's wounds, should Diefenbaker be forcibly persuaded to step down.

In power Nowlan was also well placed within the Cabinet and the party to grapple with Atlantic Canada's various economic problems. In the end this complex task challenged and defeated his considerable skill and imagination. All of this Conrad describes with insight in her chapter "Minister From Atlantic Canada". Faced with the responsibility of reconciling the conflicting demands of the region within the constraints of capitalism, federalism and international politics, according to Conrad Nowlan came to accept, perhaps all too readily, "the limits of political power in solving economic problems", and turned instead "to individual efforts to help his region", a strategy which reaped only limited success (p. 250).

Structural constraints, personal perceptions and political alliances may also have hampered Nowlan's ability to resolve the region's difficulties. Too often those seeking solutions to the Atlantic provinces' problems see the area as a community of mutual interests and aspirations in search of an appropriate policy and a perceptive and sympathetic government; whereas the area may more realistically be seen as one of conflicting and competing geographic, ethnic and economic interests, which can scarcely be accommodated by a single policy or a simple strategy, a fact which Nowlan was obliged to acknowledge during his prolonged efforts to aid the ailing coal and steel industry in Cape Breton. Solutions may also have been hampered by Nowlan's often narrow, parochial definition of region, especially in its exclusion of "Acadians, out-port Newfoundlanders, or even a minority of voters in his own constituency" (p. xiii). A realistic appreciation of the area's diverse character, needs and aspirations was essential to the resolution of its problems. One might also speculate to what extent Nowlan's ability to secure federal resources for the region was constrained by his close friendship with the Bay Street faction of his party. After all, Donald Fleming, Wallace McCutcheon and George Hees were not the region's greatest friends in the Diefenbaker government: indeed Fleming seemed to pride himself upon his success in fending off regional raids on the federal treasury, including those in support of the Maritime coal industry.¹

The image of Nowlan which emerges from Donald F. Fleming's inflated, self-important, two volume memoir, *So Very Near* (Toronto, 1985) is that of a "shrewd, popular and realistic man",² if a bit too soft on partisan income tax evaders.³ Above all Nowlan is seen as a man who had to be, and could be guided by the Bay Street Boys. A close friend, Nowlan was Fleming's choice to succeed him as Minister of Finance, and in Fleming's view the appointment worked well, so long as McCutcheon remained Nowlan's close friend and trusted adviser in

1 Donald M. Fleming, *So Very Near* (Toronto, 1985), I, p. 173.

2 *Ibid.*, II, p. 223.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 288.

Finance and “guided George in the pursuit of policies which I [Fleming] fully endorsed”.⁴ McCutcheon’s close collaboration with Nowlan and Fleming’s retention of responsibility for the International Monetary Fund, and the International Bank even after Fleming took over the justice portfolio, created the impression of Nowlan as a prisoner of his Bay Street pals. In the clear perspective of hindsight, one might speculate on whether Nowlan’s attempts at regional regeneration may have prospered more had he allied himself with the Diefenbaker wing of the party? Nowlan, however, had burned his bridges well before he entered Diefenbaker’s government, through his efforts to “Stop John” from obtaining the party’s leadership in 1956, by soliciting the candidacy of Sydney Smith, supporting Donald Fleming and even threatening to enter the contest himself in order to prevent Maritime Conservatives from going over to Diefenbaker.⁵ Diefenbaker could have had no real illusions as to Nowlan’s ultimate loyalties; had Diefenbaker entertained such illusions they would have been shattered by Nowlan’s crucial role in the conspiracy to remove Diefenbaker from the leadership of the party in January 1963.⁶ Perhaps an alliance with Prairie protest would have proven a more profitable political strategy than his junior partnership in the Bay club.

Although Conrad devotes relatively little space to Nowlan’s private life owing partly to “the sensibilities of people still living” (p. xv), she is not blind to Nowlan’s personal failings. She makes it clear that his informal, off-handed approach to problems was often a poor substitute for method and organization. Nor does she disguise the fact that his political power was based partly on patronage, or that he could on occasion countenance political trickery, including tampering with electoral lists, for party advantage.

While regional disparity was the *leit motiv* of Nowlan’s public career, an emphasis scrupulously respected by Conrad, during the Diefenbaker administration Nowlan was placed in charge of larger national responsibilities. As Minister of Inland Revenue he served not only as “The Nation’s Taxman”, but “The Minister Through Whom the C.B.C. Reports to Parliament”, during a turbulent and formative period of Canadian broadcasting. Later as Minister of Finance he faced complex decisions regarding exchange rates; nor in that position could he escape the divisive debate on defence and foreign policy which paralyzed public business during the final months of Diefenbaker’s administration. With admirable economy of language Conrad analyzes these issues with perception and authority, careful to avoid rehearsing the voluminous material to be found elsewhere on these subjects. Occasionally these constraints leave the reader anxious for more information, especially on Nowlan’s personal relations with his Chief, as well as his role in the abortive efforts to remove Diefenbaker

4 *Ibid.*, p. 528.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 324-326.

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 590-593.

from the party's leadership.

In 306 pages of well written text, Conrad has given us a thoroughly researched study of a significant Maritimer, whose efforts to serve his region were constrained neither by a lack of commitment, energy, political power or skill, but a man who remained a captive of his constricted perception of his region and a federal and capitalist structure, which he was not prepared to challenge.

CARMAN MILLER

Intellectuals and the Canadian State

“OCCASIONALLY A QUESTION OF PROFESSIONAL ETHICS has been raised”, O.D. Skelton noted in 1932, “— how far is the economist working for a government or a business corporation to find his model in the lawyer, accepting and arguing a brief, or in the priest, dedicated to the advancement of an accepted belief?”¹ What conflicts, in other words, might arise between the opinions and advice of “experts” and either political expedience or corporate profits? When Skelton raised this question, at the nadir of the Great Depression, nothing was more desperately sought by government or by business than professionally measured and rational reactions to economic realities. For politicians and board directors alike, macroeconomic remedies for the chronic ailments of the Depression became the enticing but elusive panacea of their time. The short answer to Skelton’s question was that few, if any, constraints would be imposed on viable approaches to a seemingly insolvable economic crisis either by the state, which feared social collapse, or by private enterprise, which had collapsed. A long answer to this question, in terms of the growth of intellectual participation in the “inner councils” of Canadian government, forms the basis of Doug Owrām’s *The Government Generation: Canadian intellectuals and the state 1900-1945* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1986), an important new work on the history of ideas in statebuilding.

While no single thesis emerges from this study, Owrām does pursue as a central theme the professionalization of Canada’s emerging interventionist state during the first half of the 20th century. In an engaging narrative, which Owrām himself describes as a “mid-range synthesis” resting halfway between a sharply focussed monograph and a sweeping survey, we are introduced to an eclectic range of Canadian intellectuals who, by the sheer force of their ideas and convictions, collectively shaped the contours of the modern Canadian state. Using a wide range of both printed and manuscript sources, Owrām argues that

1 O.D. Skelton, “Fifty Years of Political and Economic Science in Canada”, in *Fifty Years Retrospect*, Royal Society of Canada Anniversary Volume 1882-1932 (n.p., 1932), p. 89.