

Writing the History of Ontario in the 1980s: Defining a Distinctive Society:

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Review Essays/Notes critiques

Writing the History of Ontario in the 1980s: Defining a Distinctive Society:

21 AUGUST 1991 WILL BE ETCHED on humanity's memory as the day Boris Yeltsin heroically rescued Mikhail Gorbachev and *perestroika* from political oblivion by staring down the forces of the Soviet Union's gang of eight and thwarting their attempted coup. 21 August 1991 is indelibly imprinted on my consciousness as the day when, to honour a long-overdue commitment to *Acadiensis*, I finally completed the reading of all (well, most) of the books published in the 1980s pertaining to the history of Ontario. In the still of an uncharacteristically balmy late-August night deep in cottage country, Ted Koppel, live from Moscow, and I contemplated the same urgent question. What does it all mean?

A little nihilism may be in order. Why should some unity of intellectual purpose or insight characterize the corpus of major contributions to the historiography of Ontario produced in the 1980s, or any other decade? After all, the publication of a history book is largely the result of random factors. The availability of subsidies, the predilections of presses, their editors and their reviewers, and authors' decisions to go for the main chance instead of a series of articles have much to do with what is published in book form, neither the only nor necessarily the preferred vehicle for communicating historical knowledge. Much of the "new" social history, for example, exists only in article form. The catalogue of major publications that appeared in the 1980s can also be read, for example, as the biases of dissertation supervisors and granting agencies in the 1970s or, increasingly after 1975, as the agenda of the Ontario Historical Studies Series, rather than as a reflection of the inner-directed intellectual priorities of regional historians in the 1980s. In short, I have at least initially adopted the null hypothesis: the historiography of Ontario produced in the 1980s, as represented by the major monographs published during the decade, has no unifying meaning or purpose beyond geographical reference. This is the best way to avoid disappointment.

Consequently, it is not so disappointing to discover that much of what historians of Ontario might have focused on in the 1980s as the result of both the historiographical ferment of the 1970s and the great sociological issues of the time is largely unrepresented in the big books of the 1980s. Methodologically, computers, machine-readable data bases and quantification — cliometrics — seem to have made little headway in the decade. This is not history that counts. Social structural and demographic history, women's history, the history of the family, of childhood,

of aging and death, of standards of living and occupations, of the rich, the poor and the middle classes, of cultural consciousness, of environmental awareness and the social history of science and medicine — in a word social science history — did not provide a unifying conceptual framework for the major projects of the decade. It did produce some stimulating examples of what could be done.

Gregory Kealey's *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism, 1867-1892* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1980) is a meticulous reconstruction of the effects of the introduction of factory-centred production on formerly skilled trades and occupations in Toronto in the last three decades of the 19th century. Kealey's evidence demonstrates how the first generation of industrialized workers adapted pre-industrial artisanal traditions to new circumstances in order to counteract the pressures of factory production and to develop a new culture rooted in the struggle for worker control of the shop floor. Did a similar historical process ensue wherever industrial capitalism replaced artisanal modes of production in Ontario? Did other artisans respond as defensively as shoemakers and coopers? And what is the linkage between these events and the emergence in Ontario of a distinctive working-class culture?

In the realm of women's history, Marjorie Griffin Cohen's *Women's Work, Markets, and Economic Development in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1988) rejects the generally accepted argument that industrialization victimized women first by exploiting them as workers and then by relegating them to the unequal and separate sphere of merely domestic employments. Instead, she argues, Ontario women's unique productive contributions to the domestic economy of the self-sufficient pioneer household represented the beginnings of a linearly progressive and laterally expanding economic role for women that was sustained through all the successive stages of regional economic development. Within the context of a patriarchal system of production and gender-based divisions of labour, women's work, Cohen argues, was essential to the development of a capitalist economy in Ontario. This argument takes account of both home-work and non-domestic labour, paid and unremunerated work, as significant historical female contributions to the economy of the family and household and hence, to the economy of the province. The difficulty, however, is that it fails entirely to address the larger problem of the relationship between female economic productivity and the ineluctable realities — legal, social, political, cultural, sexual — of women's, especially working women's, experience in Victorian Ontario. If women's work was truly an engine of economic progress, why did women so demonstrably fail to reap the rewards of their labours?

In *Language, Schooling and Cultural Conflict: The Origins of the French Language Controversy in Ontario* (Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989) Chad Gaffield employs, among other techniques, the methods of historical demography to understand the origins of the French-language controversy in late-Victorian Ontario. Using Prescott County as his laboratory, Gaffield concludes

that the Mowat government's determination to anglicize the county's "alien" francophone population by eradicating French-language education on the grounds that language and culture were responsible for the apparent social and economic backwardness of this immigrant population was a serious misreading of local history. Prescott's francophone community in fact had deep historical roots in the county; but the geographical and economic marginality of their farms produced over time more widespread proletarianization than was evident among their better-located anglophone neighbours. Consequently, the quality of francophone schools, and levels of attendance and literacy, fell behind those of the county's more prosperous anglophone community. The government chose to interpret this as evidence of racial inferiority, reason enough to eliminate French-language education not just in Prescott County, but everywhere in Ontario.

Another regional minority whose history and culture have been rendered irrelevant for political purposes is defended in Bruce Hodgins and Jamie Benedickson, *The Temagami Experience: Recreation, Resources and Aboriginal Rights in the Northern Ontario Wilderness* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1989). This is one of the first serious attempts in Canadian historiography to write environmental history, in this case the history of human contact with and use of the Temagami Forest Reserve in northern Ontario. This area was first inhabited by the Teme-augama Anishnabai, who call their homeland N'Daki Menan and who have been waging a political and legal battle to have their historical land claims in Temagami recognized by the federal and provincial governments before any further development takes place in the Forest Reserve. It is a homeland they have been compelled to share, often happily, sometimes not, with fur traders, missionaries, lumbermen, mining interests, recreationists (wilderness campers, cottage owners, resort and youth camp operators) and permanent non-native settlements. It is also a homeland that has been fought over by the federal and provincial governments, the competing commercial interests of Ottawa and Toronto, and the alternative visions of economic development and wilderness preservation. Hodgins and Benedickson clearly hope to link the future of Temagami with wilderness preservation, controlled recreational usage and limited resource exploitation as policies most compatible with the Teme-augama Anishnabai band's historical usage of and territorial rights in N'Daki Menan. It is a compelling case, but one which the Supreme Court of Canada rejected in the summer of 1991 by denying the Teme-augama Anishnabai's identity as a distinct culture with a vested historical interest and residual treaty rights in Temagami. So much for interventionist history.

History as advocacy is not far beneath the surface of Laurel Sefton MacDowell's *'Remember Kirkland Lake': The History and Effects of the Kirkland Lake Gold Miners' Strike, 1941-1942* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1983). This is the story of a cause lost to a superior force of federal and provincial politicians, mine owners, the *Globe and Mail*, the Ontario Provincial Police and competing public wartime priorities. Those priorities allowed governments, in effect, to

wage war on unorganized labour by pegging wages at pre-Depression levels, manipulating manpower resources, defending management rights in war-related industries, and restricting the collective bargaining rights of the industrial unions, in the national interest, while at the same time paying lip-service to the rights of workers to organize. In the Kirkland Lake strike, as well, the anti-labour forces' racism was barely concealed. In the end, W.L.M. King's fearfulness, Mitch Hepburn's vengefulness, and the growing economic marginality of the Kirkland Lake field conspired to thwart the strikers. They lost the battle in 1942, but in so doing moved the labour wars ahead by tarring Liberalism with the brush of anti-unionism, thereby enhancing the appeal of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation and providing a stimulus to other workers to organize for industrial action. In 1943, one-third of Canada's organized workers were involved in strikes, and by 1949 union membership in Canada had tripled. One of labour's rallying cries was 'Remember Kirkland Lake'. Perhaps because a Sefton played a major role in the strike, in this retelling the remembrance of things past acquires the urgency of unfinished business.

Finally, Geoffrey Bilson's *A Darkened House: Cholera in Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1980) examines the multiple ways in which uncontrollable disease — in this case repeated epidemics of cholera — affects society. What is interesting here is not so much the fearful arithmetic of mortality (20,000 cholera deaths in British North America between 1832 and 1871) but rather the disease's effect on social development in a fledgling colonial society such as Upper Canada. In particular it seriously debilitated the province's labour pool, especially the artisanal class and the working poor, and disrupted trade and commerce at a crucial stage in the province's economic development. But this experience also taught the poor, Bilson argues, that the authority of civil government was weak and in times of crisis could be successfully resisted, just as it reminded the civil authorities that they ignored or bullied the poor at their peril.

These six studies at least have this in common. Each deals with a group — artisans, women, franco-Ontarions, native Ontarions, hard-rock miners, the sick poor — whose marginal existence was further marginalized by the processes that shaped the region's history. The experience of these groups in many respects conforms to the history of similar groups, who were actors in similar processes, elsewhere. But the larger structures of society that those processes generated in Ontario, the popular mentalities that those structures generated, and the nature of individual experience that they sustained, undoubtedly were peculiar to Ontario. This is the case not so much because these historians say so, but because of the evidence provided by the research of another group of scholars. They have revisited the earlier history of the province in particular and have called upon the insights of cultural history, intellectual history, business history and prosopography to describe the evolution, between 1784 and 1850, of a common ideal of social organization and action for Victorian Ontario.

To put the argument most succinctly, individual experience in Ontario has been shaped by the persistence, since at least the mid-19th century, of a common, distinctive regional culture. William Westfall and John Webster Grant offer the most convincing evidence on this score, but it is useful to read what they have to say in conjunction with several other studies that provide an essential historical context and perspective. The best way to envisage this body of work is as a George Lucas trilogy — *Colonial Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, *the Revenge of the Methodists*. Bruce Wilson's *The Enterprises of Robert Hamilton: A Study of Wealth and Influence in Early Upper Canada, 1776-1812* (Ottawa, Carleton University Press, 1983) sets the stage by exploring, through the economic activities of Robert Hamilton, the formative years of commercial development in Upper Canada in the wake of the American Revolutionary War. From his base at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Hamilton fashioned after 1783 a formidable commercial empire built upon provisioning British army garrisons, land speculation, the fur trade, the carrying trade between the lower and upper Great Lakes, shipbuilding and retail commerce. The important point here, according to Wilson, is that Hamilton exemplified the potential for the young colony to sustain a "shopkeeper aristocracy", a business elite representing a strain of "commercial Toryism" capable of developing Upper Canada in the aftermath of the American Revolution. Economic ties to England and Montreal, good relations with the British army, the ability to promote economic networks through marriage and business partnerships, and a willingness to take risks tempered by concern for the political and social stability of the province — these were the qualities that made entrepreneurs like Robert Hamilton important assets to early Upper Canada.

Hamilton and his kind briefly (1790-1812) represented the aspirations of the first wave of post-revolutionary migrants to Upper Canada who aspired to create an Anglo-American society anchored by conservative British political ideals and motivated by an American vision of material progress. But, as Jane Errington explains in *The Lion, The Eagle and Upper Canada: A Developing Canadian Ideology* (Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), in the wake of the War of 1812, if not sooner, Upper Canada's second generation of Loyalists either forgot or abjured their fathers' Anglo-Americanism. They identified the British connection as the fountainhead of a reactionary Tory ideology that explained their past, secured their right to govern and allowed them to develop the province in accordance with their repressive political and social principles. In this context, Errington argues, the loosely-knit alliance of political reformers that emerged in the 1820s must be interpreted as an attempt to restore the earlier concept of Upper Canada as an Anglo-American society whose British political ideals were compatible with American-inspired visions of material progress.

The bastion of the "court party" was the executive council and, to a lesser extent, the legislative council. The reformers' garrison, after 1820, was the

legislative assembly whose members, Keith Johnson reminds us in *Becoming Prominent: Regional Leadership in Upper Canada, 1791-1841* (Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), were regarded by Bishop John Strachan and Sir John Beverley Robinson as "ignorant clowns" and "scum". Using data about occupation, wealth-holding, office-holding, patronage and political careers, Johnson presents a collective biography of the men elected to the Upper Canadian House of Assembly between 1791 and 1841. Unhappily, either the data refused to behave the way he had anticipated they would, or Johnson ought to have employed more sophisticated multivariate analytical techniques. In either case, none of the variables seems to offer very convincing explanations of political success and social status. Nevertheless, some broadly defined distinctions emerge from the study. Before 1820, landed wealth was an attribute shared by most MHAs. After 1820, merchants and lawyers were the new boys on the block. Similarly, after 1820 Scots-born and American-born MHAs were more common than native Canadians (the Irish-born were not a factor). The Scots and the Americans were more likely to be involved in industry and commerce than their native-born Canadian or English-born seatmates, who tended toward the law and public service. Finally, to whatever extent election to the House of Assembly led to future political preferment — for example in the form of local magistracies or militia offices — the one group clearly singled out by the elite for exclusion from all forms of preferment was the province's fastest-growing religious denomination after 1820, the Methodists.

Johnson's data reinforce Errington's description of the nature of Upper Canadian political alignments before and after the War of 1812 and put some social, economic and demographic flesh on the ideological skeletons of Tory and Reformer provided by Errington. In *Two Worlds: The Protestant Culture of Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989) William Westfall explores the synthesis, a "distinctive Protestant culture", that emerged in mid-century from the clash of these two warring traditions. In effect, evangelical Protestantism as represented by the Methodist formula for individual and societal improvement (individual experience, political and social dissent, revivalism, religious experimentalism) triumphed over the Loyalist/Anglican ideal (order, reason and rational piety promoted through a natural alliance of church and state). But the Loyalist/Anglican ideal was not buried. Rather, it fused with the Methodist tradition to create a new synthesis essential for social and economic progress. Under the influence of evangelical Protestantism, Westfall argues, Victorian Upper Canadians finally took religion and put it where it belonged — in gothic temples dedicated to the cult of social respectability. In this way they freed the state to pursue the secular equivalent of religious millennialism, a transcontinental nation and its engine of development, the railway. According to Henry Adams, the "Virgin and the Dynamo" represented the sacred and the profane poles of western civilization in the 19th century. According to William Westfall, the gothic Protestant church and the railway symbolized the inherent

social/cultural duality of Victorian Ontario, separate and equal partners in the promotion of order and happiness through social and economic progress.

John Webster Grant, in his history of religion in 19th century Ontario, *A Profusion of Spires: Religion in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1988), echoes Westfall's conclusions somewhat more succinctly. The battle between establishmentarianism and voluntarism, between the Anglican and the Methodist view of the relationship between church and state, resulted not in an alliance of church and state, but rather in a voluntarist Protestant "moral wardship" of society. One consequence, Grant argues, was that organized religion was increasingly compelled to act as an umbrella for a wide variety of socially-relevant activity, in effect to innovate, experiment and improve, or risk redundancy. (Recall that in *The Regenerators* Ramsay Cook argues that evangelical Protestantism in fact became irrelevant in Canada precisely because, in the face of intellectual competition from social progressives, it tried to substitute the insights of sociology for the succour of revealed truth).¹

Marguerite Van Die's *An Evangelical Mind: Nathanael Burwash and the Methodist Tradition in Canada, 1839-1918* (Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989) paints a rather more complex portrait of Methodism in decline as revealed by the life of one of Victorian Ontario's leading Methodist theologians and educators. A scientist by training, Burwash believed in the compatibility of reason and faith and in the church's mission to improve secular society through its moral wardship. But as the most articulate Canadian proponent of the doctrine of Christian perfectionism, Burwash clung to the evangelical belief that the key to both secular perfection and personal salvation was individual repentance, conversion "and the acceptance of a disciplined life that reflected a spiritual transformation" induced by a powerful personal religious "experiment" assisted by Divine grace. Consequently, while the edifice of Methodism as a social religion was tumbling down around him, Burwash was capable of arguing that as the "national" religion of Canada Methodism should provide the essential spiritual context for the curriculum of the University of Toronto, Canada's national university. On the other hand, Burwash regarded amalgamation with other similarly troubled Protestant denominations and the subsequent loss of the Methodist identity as little more than a business arrangement designed to free Methodism, in the guise of a united Protestant church, to pursue its real historical destiny as a missionary religion. Burwash's lofty ecumenism makes a stark contrast with the muscular Methodism of the Ryerson era.

As Susan Houston and Alison Prentice demonstrate in *Schooling and Scholars in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1988) the Methodist-led Protestant synthesis registered one of its first significant victories

1 Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada* (Toronto, 1985).

in the emergence of the Ontario school system dedicated to the attainment of social perfection and the avoidance of societal disaster. To be governable, it was argued, Upper Canada's immigrant population first had to be educated in the virtues of peace, order and self-discipline. This would lead them to "the real possibility of individual improvement and, ultimately, moral, political and economic salvation". Houston and Prentice argue that the propaganda of compulsory elementary education as the key to individual efficiency, the invention of the Ryersonian school promoters, was one of the great public policy successes of the 19th century. If Westfall and Grant are to be believed, it was the culture of Protestant evangelicalism that made it possible.

To whatever extent the Protestant voluntarist synthesis was the dominant culture of Victorian Ontario, its hegemony was secured in large part by its evangelists, public men and women whose words and deeds anticipated secular perfection as a necessary precondition for post-millennial spiritual renewal. Thus *In the Children's Aid: J.J. Kelso and Child Welfare in Ontario* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1981), Andrew Jones' and Leonard Rutman's study of J.J. Kelso, founder of the Children's Aid Society and author of the province's first Children's Protection Act (1893), describes "the Hon. Provincial Kidnapper" as a man who wanted to "pour Ontario into a mould of middle-class standards through moral suasion, education and social reform". Kelso, who had his fingers in every reform activity associated with children and their environment, may have been the quintessential social gospeller. But the social gospel credentials of E.C. Drury, premier of Ontario in 1919-1923, were equally impressive. As a participant in the 1914 convention of the Social Service Congress of Canada, Drury described urban reform as the "cleansing of the sewers of our civilization" and rural reform as the preservation of the wellspring of civilization. Under his leadership the United Farmers of Ontario launched a legislative program that Drury's biographer, Charles M. Johnston, describes as "entrenching virtue". In *E.C. Drury: Agrarian Idealist* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1986) Johnston pointedly concludes that "Catfish" Drury was in fact an evangelical Methodist who sought to entrench "the perceived values and standards of a Victorian yesterday" in the society of post-war Ontario. The implication, in this otherwise excellent biography (one of the best the Ontario Historical Studies Series has produced), is that Drury and his policies were anachronistic. But another possibility is that we should abandon our usual periodization of the history of Ontario and agree that the 19th century, as defined by Westfall's cultural yardstick, did not end until, say, 1940.

In *'Honest Enough to Be Bold': The Life and Times of Sir James Pliny Whitney* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1985) Charles Humphries offers no clues about the origins of Whitney's political behaviour as premier of Ontario in the decade before the First World War. All we learn is that Whitney, like Agatha Christie, mysteriously disappeared for a time, and returned a different person, in Whitney's case a man committed to public service. Whitney was, arguably, the

first “progressive” Conservative politician in Ontario, a precursor of a John Robarts or a William Davis. He was sometimes accused of being a socialist because of his willingness to promote stable social, economic and technological progress through direct government intervention in the marketplace and in society. His own explanation, that he governed simply through the application of “common sense” to initiatives dictated by “public opinion”, belies, among other things, the superior talents of the men he chose as cabinet colleagues. But none of this explains the personal, familial, cultural or intellectual influences which shaped Whitney’s understanding of public opinion or his responses to it. It is tempting to speculate that Whitney and Drury shared many fundamental assumptions about the nature of Victorian and Edwardian Ontario and its people.

Three other biographies round out contributions made to this category of regional historiography in the 1980s. Two of them, Michael Bliss’ biography of Sir Frederick Banting and James Greenlee’s life of Sir Robert Falconer, deal with subjects of national, if not international, interest whose contributions as, respectively, research scientist and educator happen to have been made in Ontario. But in *Banting: A Biography* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1985), Michael Bliss makes it patently clear that “growing up Methodist in Alliston before the Great War” had much to do with the shaping of Fred Banting’s character and outlook, just as the relatively unsophisticated scientific research environment of early 20th century Ontario made it possible for an unimaginative plodder such as Fred Banting to become a guru of medical research. A malicious, self-promoting, jealous, arrogant man incapable of critical thinking or even of explaining the science behind the discovery of insulin, a philanderer and, possibly, a wife-beater, an alcoholic, an anti-semite, an admirer of Russian communism and Italian fascism, Bliss’ Banting is almost a caricature of the excesses of the “aspirin age”. In Frederick Banting, Alliston and Methodism had a lot to answer for.

Sir Robert Falconer, the transplanted Nova Scotian who became president of the University of Toronto in 1907, was a Dr. Jekyll to Banting’s Mr. Hyde. In *Sir Robert Falconer: A Biography* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1988) James Greenlee portrays Falconer as a Christian idealist like Burwash, an imperialist/nationalist in the mould of George Parkin and G.M. Grant, an early champion of academic freedom in Canadian universities, a humanist who believed in the compatibility of reason and faith, of science and religion, of a liberal education and the professionalization of knowledge, of pure learning and the social utility of the university. In short, Falconer was Ontario’s first modern university president. His obsession with putting the University of Toronto on the “high road of the world’s intellectual commerce” as defined by Oxford and Cambridge was yesterday’s version of today’s relentless pursuit of “centres of excellence”.

If Greenlee’s Falconer was a man of and for his times, Lillian Gates’ William

Lyon Mackenzie, as described in *After the Rebellion: The Later Years of William Lyon Mackenzie* (Toronto, Dundurn Press, 1988) remained, to the end, an irrelevant nuisance. Both during his exile in the United States and after his return to Canada Mackenzie was forever arrogant, self-righteous, quixotic, at times probably mentally unstable, a man hated by his enemies and not always loved by his friends. In this account, nevertheless, the post-rebellion Mackenzie emerges as a sort of 19th century I.F. Stone whose uncompromisingly independent assessment of the day's public men and public issues was rooted in a heroic vision of the infinite possibilities of truly liberal government. From this perspective, Mackenzie's involvement in New York politics, and in particular his critique of Martin Van Buren's administration, are especially interesting. Too bad Gore Vidal didn't write this Mackenzie into *Burr*.

If Mackenzie and his opinions were largely irrelevant when he finally returned to Canada West it was because the process of cultural fusion described by Westfall was already well under way, accompanied and stimulated by a parallel process of rapid economic development fuelled by the growing success of the province's wheat farmers and the emergence of Toronto as the region's mercantile and financial metropolis. In *The Bank of Upper Canada* (Ottawa, Carleton University Press, 1987) Peter Baskerville examines one of the principal agents of this transformation. He argues that the establishment of the Bank of Upper Canada at York in 1822 was instrumental in establishing Toronto's hegemony over Kingston, just as it was instrumental in freeing Upper Canadian merchants from their dependence, for credit and other financial services, on Montreal and British institutions. As the bank-on-the-spot, the Bank of Upper Canada proved surprisingly sensitive, before 1837, to the local needs of an essentially frontier society, in spite of the fact that it was at least nominally under the control of "an elite without economic talent". After 1837 the Bank of Upper Canada played a major role in the financing of essential capital-intensive public works projects — railways in particular. It was finally dismantled by the reformers as a way of attacking its principal client and creature of the Conservatives, the Grand Trunk Railroad. Baskerville concludes that the Bank of Upper Canada succeeded in stimulating commerce, agriculture and transportation better than might have been expected in a colony perpetually short of capital.

John McCallum explains the other engine of Upper Canadian economic and social development — wheat — in *Unequal Beginnings: Agriculture and Economic Development in Quebec and Ontario Until 1870* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1980). McCallum argues that the ease with which wheat could be grown in Upper Canada as a cash crop for export made the immigrant pioneer farmer instantly part of a cash economy that provided the surplus capital not only for individual improvement, but for the creation of an entire regional economic infrastructure — banks, canals, railways, credit — as well as urbanization, industrialization and social structural differentiation. Upper Canadians paid a high price for their reliance on wheat as "the driving force of the provincial

economy” because of the cycles of boom and bust that invariably accompanied wheat farming. In the end the soil exhaustion that resulted from wheat “mining” led to the wholesale restructuring of agriculture in Ontario in the 1870s. But from the 1830s until 1870, according to McCallum, Ontario was a classic example of a successful staples economy freed by its own success from the intervention of external sources of development (or underdevelopment, as the case may be, since the book also deals with Quebec’s failure to emulate the successes of Ontario’s wheat economy).

The obvious beneficiaries of this region were Canada West’s immigrant farm families among whom, in the period 1840 to 1870, those of Irish birth and Irish descent were the largest single ethnic group. It is possible to state this unequivocally as the result of Donald Akenson’s revisionist analysis *The Irish in Ontario: A Study in Rural History* (Kingston, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1985). Akenson’s special mission is to demolish several myths about the Irish in Canadian history, beginning with the assumption that Victorian Ontario’s immigrant Irish population was predominantly Roman Catholic, poor, urban and clannish. Wrong, says Akenson. The Irish in Ontario were not the stereotypes of *Going My Way*. For one thing, they have to be subdivided into at least four different groups, each with its own unique historical identity: pre-Famine Protestant Irish, pre-Famine Catholic Irish, Roman Catholic Famine Irish, and Protestant Famine Irish (who must have been nearly as numerous as their Catholic countrymen). For another, farming was the most common occupation, certainly among the pre-Famine immigrants, because the Irish shared with all other immigrant groups the desire to own land as the best form of capital and the firmest foundation on which to establish the family’s future social and economic security. Third, in spite of the myth that they had been by-passed by the agricultural revolution and hence were too backward to farm commercially in North America, the Irish were at least as successful as, but no more unsuccessful than, any other group of agricultural immigrants. Akenson concludes that either Canada received all the “winners” and the United States all the “losers” from the Irish diaspora, or that America’s historical infatuation with the romance of Irish nationalism has induced a kind of cultural amnesia about its Irish immigrants who never acquired the characteristics celebrated by Tin Pan Alley.

More evidence in support of Akenson’s thesis is provided by Bruce Elliott’s *Irish Migrants in the Canadas: A New Approach* (Kingston, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1988) which focuses on Protestant emigration from North Tipperary to Upper Canada, 1818-1847. Elliott argues that, far from being impoverished, unskilled and backward cast-offs from Irish society, these migrants were principally small farmers facing an uncertain economic future and threatened by social disorder. They emigrated, as families, with some surplus capital from the sale of their farms. They preferred chain migration, coming to relatives or close acquaintances who were already established in Ontario and who could provide assistance. Finally, they migrated primarily to guarantee their children a

secure future grounded in family solidarity within the context provided by an idealized vision of rural life; hence their preoccupation with the social and economic strategies — inheritance, geographical mobility, occupational mobility, kinship networks — which I have described in *Hopeful Travellers*.²

Cecil Houston's and William Smyth's *The Sash Canada Wore: A Historical Geography of the Orange Order of Canada* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1980) provides further grist for Akenson's thesis. Apart from its identification with Protestantism and Loyalty, the other most salient characteristic of the Orange Lodge in Victorian Ontario, according to Houston and Smyth, was that it was a predominantly rural institution following the expansion of the farming frontier and providing a "surrogate neighbourhood" for isolated populations of rural Irish Protestants. The existence of a lodge did not depend on the proximity of a Catholic population for its members to bait, nor, since its members tended to be fairly young, on a lengthy memory or experience of religious factionalism. It depended only on the perception of a common need to associate voluntarily in a non-denominational (but Protestant) friendly society devoted to benevolent assistance, social intercourse and community solidarity. You can still see a big Glorious Twelfth parade in places like Stayner, Collingwood or Owen Sound; but the shoppers who stop to watch think that the fellow in the tails and top hat on the white horse is the winner of a Fred Astaire look-alike contest at the local strip mall. Orangeism, like Westfall's fused culture of evangelical secular Protestantism, is now a relic of a dimly perceived social past that has been replaced, in the last half-century, by a new culture defined by the mass production of goods and services to sustain, and in turn to be sustained by, the promise of a perpetually rising standard of material well-being.

I hope this does no violence to K.J. Rea's *The Prosperous Years: The Economic History of Ontario, 1939-1975* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1985), a history of our own time written from an economist's point of view. Rea describes the factors that resulted in Ontario's unsurpassed economic growth between 1945 and 1970. Increased productivity, unprecedented population growth, a younger, better-educated and healthier population, the shift to a service-oriented and therefore more labour-intensive economy, and above all a profound belief in government's ability to manage the provincial economy through direct intervention all contributed to the rapid achievement of post-war prosperity. But these developments were accompanied by a parallel loss of economic autonomy as Mitch Hepburn's and George Drew's resistance to federal encroachments on provincial policy priorities through conditional transfer payments gave way to Leslie Frost's reluctant reconciliation of federal and provincial social and economic priorities in return for Ottawa's much-needed cash. As a result, whereas the

2 David Gagan, *Hopeful Travellers: Families, Land and Social Change in Mid-Victorian Peel County, Canada West* (Toronto, 1980).

provincial government once spent its revenues on “things”, after 1950 its income was increasingly used to purchase “services” made available only by these transfer payments. The difficulty, Rea argues, using education as an example, is that “neither the quantity nor the quality of [these] services...appears to have been related to any specific [economic] objectives” beyond an ill-founded enthusiasm for the development of “human capital” as an engine of further economic progress. Unable to measure either the real benefits conferred by the provision of these services or the productivity of the providers, as time passed governments began to adopt merely pragmatic rather than ideological or value-oriented policies to deal with the rapid, unwelcome, but irreversible growth of public expenditures in these areas. Rea sees this as evidence of the growing conviction in the 1970s that effective government management of the economy was a fading possibility at the very point in time when Ontario’s mature industrial economy was threatened with obsolescence and by a permanent westward shift in the balance of economic potential.

Preserving that balance in Ontario’s favour, as Christopher Armstrong points out in *The Politics of Federalism: Ontario’s Relations With the Federal Government, 1867-1942* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1981), accounts for the alacrity with which Oliver Mowat became the champion of the “compact theory” of Confederation. As the wealthiest and most populous province in 1867, Ontario had more to gain from autonomy than from equality. To ensure that the province was left alone to pursue its economic destiny, Mowat promoted the idea of “co-ordinate sovereignty” and relentlessly challenged the federal government on the issue of provincial rights which by 1896, says Armstrong, had “attained a position close to motherhood”. Mowat’s successors followed his example, again especially when Ontario’s economic interests were threatened by federal interference, for example with regard to the province’s “manufacturing condition” and hydroelectric development policies, and the regulation of incorporated companies operating in Ontario. Finally, the locally insurmountable costs associated with the depredations of the Great Depression led to the federal invasion, reluctantly and by grudging mutual agreement, of the province’s jurisdiction over social policy and social development, although Ontario resisted to the bitter end. Armstrong approves of Ontario’s defence of decentralized federalism because it clearly suits a nation in which historical local and regional loyalties can be as compelling as, yet not antithetical to, national imperatives. Ontarions, Armstrong concludes, have too frequently failed to recognize the distinction.

That complaint scarcely applies to the historians who made major contributions to the history of Ontario in the 1980s. The history of Ontario is alive and well and is being written by scholars who do not confuse the histories of province and nation in order to aggrandize the importance of the former. Neither are they guilty of the smugness that has sometimes characterized the history of “Empire Ontario”. Certainly the underlying premise of all of these studies is that Ontario’s history is neither the history of Canada writ small, nor even the working out of

one of the grand designs of Canadian history — frontierism, metropolitanism or Laurentianism — on a local scale. Most of this research emanates from a critical, largely revisionist re-assessment of received wisdom. Perhaps because the insights afforded by social, economic and cultural history account for a disproportionate share of the decade's historiography, an unusual, but welcome, amount of attention is focused on the meaning of human experience in a societal context. Much of the analysis is distinctly critical of, or at least pessimistic about, the nature of that experience and is not reticent about wearing its biases on its sleeve. Above all, these studies seem to contribute to the description of a unique society whose evolving characteristics were forged by processes that were not in themselves peculiar to Ontario. But in the context created by the interplay of time, place, people and circumstances they produced a distinctive society — one of Careless' "limited identities" — that has no precise antecedent and was not subsequently replicated in another time and another place as the nation expanded. This is important information. The stakes riding on claims of societal uniqueness in Canada are pretty high these days. Does Joe know Ontario?

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