

Canada's Court Jesters

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IF THREE RECENT BOOKS ON POLITICAL AND PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS are anything to go by, those of us who choose to live the life of an intellectual are bound to be disappointed. This is especially true for someone who takes on the role of public intellectual. By most measurements these three men were eminently successful. They were distinguished scholars whose ideas their contemporaries took seriously. They won awards and plaudits, received honours and high positions. Yet disappointment lingered.

Donald Creighton, the Tory historian of British Canadian identity, lived to see his nation transformed in ways he found repulsive. Frank Underhill, the socialist academic who helped to make social democratic ideas a part of the common national discourse, would seem to have had reason to be content. Indeed, the meanings of liberalism shifted over the course of the 20th century to the point where he found himself in the middle of the political spectrum and no longer far to the left. Yet he continued to fret about new concerns and new ideals to reach. Even O.D. Skelton, who left academe to enter the public service, rising to become perhaps the most important person in government next to the prime minister, ended his life frustrated at what he had failed to achieve. His one goal, the achievement of Canadian independence, seemed far away. When he died early in 1941, Canada had thrown aside the notion of a limited commitment to war. With France and almost all of Europe under the Nazi thumb, Canada devoted itself to total war at the side of the imperial motherland. Although Skelton saw the need and understood the peril, his disappointment at the turn of events was palpable. When you live in the world of ideas and ideals – always seeing how things could be, how they should be – it is hard not to know disillusionment even as you push forward in hope.

This essay examines three books on these public intellectuals: Donald Wright's *Donald Creighton: A Life in History*, Kenneth Dewar's *Frank Underhill and the Politics of Ideas*, and Norman Hillmer's *O.D. Skelton: A Portrait of Canadian Ambition*.¹ Of these three books, Dewar's almost-biography of Frank Underhill engages most directly with his subject's status as an intellectual. What is this kind of person, the intellectual? What makes them tick? Dewar gives several answers, none more thoughtful than his paraphrasing of the American sociologist Lewis Coser calling them "the modern descendants of priests, biblical prophets, and court jesters" (70). Intellectuals exist on the margins of social life, seeing it askance, living with a sense of "alienation from the mainstream of society" (5). These "disaffected outsiders" occupy an ambivalent place in their nation – of it, for it, and against it (6).

In the Canadian case, and for much of the 20th century, alienation had a great deal to do with national identity. What did it mean to be a Canadian? For English

1 Donald Wright, *Donald Creighton: A Life in History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015); Kenneth Dewar, *Frank Underhill and the Politics of Ideas* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015); Norman Hillmer, *O.D. Skelton: A Portrait of Canadian Ambition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).

Canadians, there remained the persistent Britishness of the Canadian project. In a nation that did not revolt against its imperial founder, yet which had gradually earned an ever more autonomous place within the empire, what did it mean to be Canadian? Most importantly, where did British heritage leave off and Canadian identity begin?

For O.D. Skelton, the answer was clear: Canada needed responsible government in its foreign affairs. A nation could not really be a nation if it did not control its foreign policy. Responsible government in domestic affairs had been won at the end of the 1840s yet Canada remained, as he saw it, a dependent colony, subject to the whims of British policy makers for whom Canada was only ever an afterthought.

Almost more than any other man (aside perhaps from Mackenzie King), Oscar Skelton helped to make this dream a reality. Skelton was an academic turned civil servant. He was a public intellectual of a different kind, rising to prominence as a political scientist at Queen's University but with strong connections to the Liberal party, to Wilfrid Laurier, and then to Mackenzie King. Skelton established himself as a political expert on a number of topics, none more so than the shape of Canada's foreign policy. After serving as Laurier's biographer, Skelton turned his attention to Mackenzie King at Laurier's death. A speech Skelton made to the Canadian Club of Ottawa solidified in King's mind the usefulness of this Queen's professor. When King prepared to go to the 1923 Imperial Conference, he turned to Skelton to help guide the Canadian delegation. Skelton impressed King and others in London, and when King went looking for someone to head up External Affairs in Ottawa he again turned to Skelton.

Skelton came to Ottawa in 1925 just as King's government was on the brink of collapse. The Liberals won only the second most seats in 1925 but managed to hold on to power in the minority parliament. Then, when they were eventually forced from office, King somehow managed to turn the public debate of the 1926 election away from the issue of his government's corruption and to win back a majority government. But this outcome was not certain. And it is worth pondering what might have happened to the nation should King have lost. King's career would certainly have been shorter. And perhaps Skelton's would have been as well. Certainly, during the crisis, Skelton was not just playing a role as a civil servant. He was drafting political strategy for the prime minister and even advising King on whether he should stay in power or concede government to Arthur Meighen. As Hillmer writes: "Skelton had more than stepped over the line separating a public servant from a political adviser. He had obliterated it" (144).

But King did win, and Skelton did stay on in Ottawa to shape Canada's external policies. He played a pivotal role in the 1926 Imperial Conference that led to the Balfour Declaration, announcing the colonies as autonomous communities within the Commonwealth. He also powerfully influenced the discussions in the lead-up to the Statute of Westminster in 1931. It was Skelton's technical and tactically brilliant work at the Conference on Operation of Dominion Legislation and Merchant Shipping Legislation that, for example, led to the recommendation of complete legislative autonomy for the dominions – a principle that would be confirmed in the Statute of Westminster. Skelton was also ambitious, and this showed up nowhere more clearly than in the way he managed to stay in power in Ottawa during the R.B. Bennett interregnum from 1930 to 1935. Hillmer argues that Skelton was

"courteous, sympathetic, respectful, even unctuous in the presence of the prime minister." Still, Hillmer says "he gave Bennett his unvarnished views. There was no trimming of policy advice to meet Conservative attitudes or biases" (188).

Norman Hillmer's 2015 masterful biography of Skelton helps us to see Skelton for who he was, warts and all, as so many used to say of good biographies from the time of Morley writing on Gladstone forward. Hillmer is appreciative yet balanced, careful in his assessments and meticulous in his research. This is the work of a senior scholar who knows what he is doing, and knows his subject. He is not flashy nor is he trying to obviously score points in debates with other historians, though certainly Hillmer has a point of view. For those who saw Skelton as Mackenzie King's "Anglophobe-in-Chief" or the man in the government who was excessively anti-British (8), Hillmer offers a more careful appreciation of an ardent Canadian nationalist. For those who celebrate the postwar foreign policy of Canada's Middle Power era of Pearson and others, Hillmer shows us how Skelton was the one who was always working towards this goal in the first place.

Yet Hillmer can also see Skelton's foibles. He shows us his blind spots – his failure, for example, to act for Jewish refugees in the 1930s. He also shows how Skelton seemed incapable of understanding that many of those with whom he disagreed were also Canadian nationalists, simply of a different stripe. So although Skelton himself wanted to completely disentangle Canadian external policies from imperial commitments, Hillmer points out that political figures like Borden who had pushed for a stronger Canadian say in imperial affairs were also acting out of their vision of the national interest. "Their aim," Hillmer notes, "had been to enhance Canada's international standing through the assumption of grand responsibilities" (97). For so many in the first half of the 20th-century, this was the divide that mattered – power through involvement in the Commonwealth or through disengagement – an identity symbiotic with Britishness or independently Canadian, shorn of history?

Donald Wright's biography of the great Canadian historian Donald Creighton takes us into the mindset of someone who disagreed strenuously with Skelton on most of these questions. Creighton was a man who urged a very different balance between Britishness and the Canadian identity. In many places Wright captures this beautifully. On Creighton's ancestors who came to Upper Canada in the mid-19th century, establishing themselves as respectable farmers, landowners, and preachers, Wright speaks of how they eventually came to see themselves as Canadian and yet how this also "meant being British" (37). For in this period and for these people, "Britishness was not something imposed from outside. It emerged from inside" (37-8). Donald Creighton was no different from his ancestors, though he was much more influential in the way his own writings came to speak for a generation of Canadians who felt this identity slipping away in the decades after the Second World War.

Like a great many influential Canadians who rose to prominence in the 20th century, Creighton was a son of the manse; in Creighton's case, though, his father was not a regular minister but the editor of the most influential Protestant publication in Canada, *The Christian Guardian*. Wright explains that Creighton grew up in Victorian and Edwardian "Toronto the Good," imbibing the solid virtues (not values – those are modern and mutable) that should have kept him on the right track: "discipline, hard work, personal responsibility, delayed gratification, patient

accumulation, abstinence, and service” (44). As a student at Victoria College in the early 1920s, Creighton rebelled from these strictures in the modern intellectual fashion – by reading modern French novels and becoming a sophisticated critic of the misplaced idealism that had led to the crisis of the Great War. The novels of Ralph Connor, with their moral sentimentality, were not for Creighton. From the beginning, Creighton showed signs of brilliance and stylish writing, though also of a Tory appreciation for order. An essay on the French Revolution had him being, so his professor thought, too critical of the chaos and violence of the revolutionary moment.

Creighton went on to Oxford, which would shape him for the rest of his days. Wright nicely portrays the ambivalent feelings of so many young bright Canadians who went to England for intellectual finishing, only to find themselves not quite at ease. The Oxford “experience was a double one: Oxford’s snobbery and brutal class system strengthened their Canadian nationalism and their hope in Canada’s future, but Oxford’s reputation as the English-speaking world’s greatest university and its mystique . . . reinforced their Britishness and their appreciation for Britain’s place in the world. Their identities were characterized by hybridity and doubleness. Canadianness and Britishness combined to form a Canadian British identity that was no less Canadian for being British” (104). From Oxford Creighton went to the Sorbonne in Paris to pursue a PhD on the economic policies of the Girondins in the French Revolution. Yet back in Canada, when he came to teach at the University of Toronto at the end of the 1920s, he soon found that research on Europe was too expensive. This is what led to his first trip to the Public Archives in Ottawa in 1930 and what would be, in 1937, his first book – *The Commercial Empire of the St Lawrence*.²

Creighton was a man of his time and Wright shows us this, especially regarding his initial intellectual works. The “Laurentian thesis” that Creighton espoused in this first book was so innovative because it found economic and environmental explanations for Canada’s existence – in the flow of Canada’s great river and in the way the merchants of early Canada used this to found a nation. Creighton was not alone here; he was shaped as much by Harold Innis and the rise of economic history as well as simply by the nationalism of the 1920s that led to the rise of the Group of Seven. For they too found the source of nationalism in Canada’s trees, rocks, and water.

Wright spends a good deal of time throughout the book giving space to Creighton’s intellectual critics. With the discussion of each new Creighton book, we hear from those who found fault with Creighton’s arguments. While the public at large came to appreciate Creighton’s writing, especially his biography of John A. Macdonald and his other texts on the nation that followed, he always had a great many academic critics. We learn more about these in this biography than we do about those who liked Creighton’s books. For example, at mid-century many scholars were sympathetically re-assessing Louis Riel and coming to see him not as he had usually been presented in English Canada – as a traitor. Creighton would have none of it. But in Wright’s volume we come to understand the critics’ but not Creighton’s perspective.

2 Donald G Creighton, *The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence, 1760-1850* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1937).

This is but one example of the way in which, in the postwar decades, the nation whose history Creighton wrote about changed around him. The nation he imagined, and in imagining helped to create, came to be imagined differently by many others. Creighton found himself more and more on the outside of the intellectual world. He responded bitterly, criticizing the “authorized version” of Canadian history presented by his colleagues and even haranguing them in his 1957 presidential speech to the Canadian Historical Association. On a personal level, Creighton seems not to have been a very easy man with whom to get along. Some of the most poignant parts of this biography relate anecdotes about Creighton’s troubled relationship with his children and grandchildren. Creighton’s prickliness and his inability to maintain friendly relations even with those closest to him could only have made his professional relationships more difficult, making his intellectual arguments harder for his colleagues to appreciate.

In the Canada of the 1960s and 1970s, Creighton became one of those voices who spoke up for what Wright calls “Old Ontario” and “Old Canada.” Sitting on Ontario Premier John Robarts’s Advisory Committee on Confederation, Creighton grew angrier and more shocked at the way his colleagues seemed willing to modernize the meaning of Canada, particularly their willingness to embrace a bicultural and bilingual vision of the country in response to Quebec’s Quiet Revolution and the rise of more radical separatism in that province. He decried the way the new Canadian flag threw away any historical references to Canada’s Britishness. He also criticized the Trudeau government’s plan to promote official bilingualism. It is worth noting that on this he was both woefully wrong and completely right. His claim that bilingualism would be of no help to individual Canadians and would be economically useless was clearly untrue, and the continued growing support by Anglophone Canadians for French immersion programs is certainly proof of this. Yet Creighton was right to claim that official bilingualism would not appease Quebec separatists, whose concerns were not with francophones outside Quebec.

Donald Creighton: A Life in History is a beautifully written biography, easily the most ambitious biography I have read in a number of years. And its attention to the psychology of the man, to the whole personality and life of its subject, is commendable. Neither of the other two biographies discussed here give nearly as full a psychological portrayal of their subjects, nor spend nearly as much time making sense of how their subjects’ childhoods and family backgrounds shaped their later life. That may, of course, be a matter of sources and lack thereof. Still, Wright offers us here a biography to emulate.

But the book is also the most frustrating of the three in the way the author’s views impinge on the narrative. At several points in the book, Wright veers off on tangents to make points that are very much of our own era. We read of how we should never romanticize pioneer life. We get a brief excursion on Lockean notions of property and improvement and the implications here for Aboriginal peoples and environmental destruction. We are told that Canada does not exist, as nations do not exist. This, of course, might be true. But as Buddhists would tell us, the self does not exist either; yet Wright does not offer this assessment. In other words, what we have here is the historian as moralist and preacher in a biography that is very much of its time.

In this, though, perhaps Wright is practicing a kind of history that Kenneth Dewar tells us was a Frank Underhill specialty – reviewing the past not for its own sake but

for what it has to offer us. *Frank Underhill and the Politics of Ideas* is the least biography-like of the books under review here, though certainly it tells the intellectual story of Underhill's life. It also treats Underhill in the way Dewar says Underhill treated the past – as someone to be appreciated for what he has to offer us. Dewar's voice often emerges from the text – comparing now and then, Underhill and us. It is a thoughtful and careful book, alive to the subtleties of Underhill's intellectual development and influences.

Like Skelton and Creighton, Underhill too found himself trying to piece together Canada's proper place in connection to Britain. Unlike the other two, Underhill served in the Great War, as a machine gunner, and like other soldiers this shaped how he thought about Britain. It made him feel more Canadian, and also more secular. But Underhill had also already been to Oxford in the years before the war and Dewar tells us how "to the end of his life, he was bound by – one almost wants to say, in thrall to – his regard for Great Britain as a mature society, in comparison with which Canada was, at best, a struggling adolescent" (27). Still Underhill, like Skelton, followed an isolationist path in the interwar years, finding fault with the illogic of the events that had led to war and seeing danger both in the legacy of the Versailles Treaty and the entanglements of continued British influence on Canadian foreign policy that could yet again draw Canadians into conflict abroad.

The growth of Underhill's socialism reinforced this isolationism. He had grown up in a Presbyterian liberal family at the end of the 19th century, but found himself drawn ever more to radical progressive thought. He was a liberal who believed in the possibilities of and need for individual freedom and liberty. But he increasingly came to see how, in the context of industrial capitalism, it was socialism that would best put these liberties into practice. Dewar explains that this trajectory of Underhill's was how he came to write this book. Dewar wanted to understand how the progressive liberalism of the 19th century that had been so locally focused and anti-statist was transformed in the 20th century into social democracy. Underhill's intellectual life traversed this terrain.

Underhill, of course, became a public intellectual in the 1920s and 1930s in his role as contributor to, and eventually editor of, *Canadian Forum*. From there he also helped to create the League for Social Reconstruction (LSR), that group of intellectuals who, in the midst of the Great Depression, acted as a kind of socialist brain trust to find solutions to the crisis of capitalism. Underhill wrote the manifesto for the LSR and he also wrote large portions of *Social Planning for Canada*, the influential book that called for the reorganization of the Canadian economy and society along socialist lines,³ and played a key role as an intellectual leader of the new Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, which tried to bridge the interests of farmers, labour, and intellectuals.

Underhill could not help but get into trouble. At a time when academic freedom was much more precarious, Underhill's public pronouncements – usually about the dangers of British imperialism and Canada's need to steer clear of it – got him into trouble at the University of Toronto. Most famous was the Underhill Affair at the outset of the Second World War, where his support for an isolationist stance was

3 Eugene Forsey et al., *Social Planning for Canada* (Toronto: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1935).

attacked as treasonous. The university president received many calls to fire the outspoken academic, and the crisis was fought out as much in public as it was in private letters both for and against Underhill's position. Ultimately, Underhill did not lose his job; but his situation was perilous. The affair left a clear impression, one that resurfaced during the 1950s and 1960s as academics collectively organized to protect their autonomy from similar threats.

Dewar, though, traces Underhill's path as he moved away from his statist interwar socialism towards different postwar commitments that would see him ultimately take up a position as curator of Laurier House, a Liberal bastion in 1950s Ottawa. Even early in the war, and especially after the fall of France, Underhill was changing his mind. As the years progressed he became more concerned about the threats of totalitarianism and authoritarianism. He also came to see the usefulness of brokerage parties in countries like Canada, abandoning his earlier thesis that political parties in British North America were nothing more than national development parties representing the interests of the capitalist bourgeoisie. He had become, in other words, someone who appreciated the Mackenzie King achievement of national unity.

Dewar cites a late 1940s letter to Underhill from Stuart Garson, premier of Manitoba (and who would later go to Ottawa as minister of justice in St. Laurent's government). In reading a recent Underhill piece, Garson found himself agreeing with much of the content and he challenged Underhill: "I think with deference that by a proper exercise of verbal definition it seems more likely that you are a liberal than I am a socialist" (125). In truth, the very meanings of liberalism were shifting in the postwar years in ways that would allow for the creation of the welfare state. Throughout the book, Dewar carefully and sympathetically traces Underhill's shifting views. He defends Underhill's modified positions, explaining them as responses to shifting conditions and as an example of Underhill's "unceasing intellectual activity" (12). In this Underhill was not alone.

Each of these men – Underhill, Skelton, and Creighton – is a fine example of the rigorous application of intellectual thought to the problems of the nation and national policy. They came to different conclusions and fought on opposing sides, yet together these books make for a fine introduction to some key parts of the intellectual life of Canada. The three biographies are all excellent yet quite different. In Hillmer's volume, we see the spare prose and empirical richness of a scholar steeped in his documents and in his field. This is a book that could be read 50 or 100 years from now and still be useful (if, of course, anyone should still care about the topics). With Wright's volume, we have an ambitious, artfully written, thorough study of an important historian and public intellectual. Wright is not entirely sympathetic to Creighton, not quite as much as one would like in a biography, yet the mastery of the work is clear. With Dewar we have a biography that is as much an intellectual essay, a foray into the ideas of Frank Underhill. Dewar is steeped in the subtleties of the era, sure of his ground, and careful in his assessments.

These are fine biographies because they make one wonder about the fate of the public intellectual today. Dewar ends his volume by making an important point. He corrects the misconception that public intellectuals have all but disappeared. In fact, intellectuals are noticeable not by their absence but by their ubiquity. They are everywhere, but in being everywhere are nowhere.

There is no longer a singular public after the fashion of the mid-20th century. We no longer live in the same kind of mass society media age, concerned with a limited number of airwaves, publications, and stations and fretting about who has access to them. Today there are many publics and each of them has their own list of intellectuals. In fact, even academia itself, so large and diverse as it currently is in Canada, is its own public with its own logic and influential figures. Yet the idea of the intellectual has not caught up to our present reality. We continue to think of intellectuals as disaffected outsiders – despite the fact that many academics within their respective disciplines speak the same language and share the same common sense. They present themselves as offering alternative viewpoints; yet in doing so their posturing is little different from what you find throughout our many public spheres, where everyone tends to think of themselves as a disaffected outsider. Some of this has to do with politics, and some with intellectual thought. But it can also be centred on hockey fandom, book blogging, or environmentalism. Everyone has their own niche, their own media, their own public – seemingly different from the rest.

Yet when everyone has their own niche, when the very notion of mainstream means so little, what is the role of the public intellectual? The dominant personal pose of the 21st century is to see oneself on the outside looking in. It does not matter if you are on the Christian Right, whether you are an Indigenous activist, or whether you simply have a specific taste in clothes or music – so many people now speak of themselves as an embattled minority speaking truth to the mainstream. How useful, then, is this model of the intellectual as disaffected outsider? Dewar does not offer precise answers. But it may be that we can see alternatives in what Dewar says was the model of the intellectual that preceded Underhill's era – those figures from the late-19th-century Anglo American world who “tended to regard themselves as leaders of opinion, enjoining their readers to act on ideals that all shared” (5-6). To focus on shared values and what we all have in common – now that truly would be an outside view in the 21st-century academy.

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