

## The Committee on Lands of the Conservation Commission, Canada, 1909-1921: Romantic Agrarianism in Ontario in an Age of Agricultural Realism

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Volume 21, Number 50, 1997

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/800404ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/800404ar>

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Publisher(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

0829-2507 (print)

1918-7750 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Bowley, P. M. (1997). The Committee on Lands of the Conservation Commission, Canada, 1909-1921: Romantic Agrarianism in Ontario in an Age of Agricultural Realism. *Scientia Canadensis*, 21, 67-87. <https://doi.org/10.7202/800404ar>

Article abstract

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# The Committee on Lands of the Conservation Commission, Canada, 1909–1921: Romantic Agrarianism in Ontario in an Age of Agricultural Realism

PATRICIA M. BOWLEY

## ABSTRACT:

The Conservation Commission of Canada (CCC) was formed in 1909 as an advisory body to Liberal Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier. It was divided into eight committees, each of which dealt with the management of a specific natural resource. The Committee on Lands (CL) was composed of members who were unable to accept or understand the changes in contemporary agriculture as it moved into the twentieth century. Dr. James Robertson, chair of the CL, was a staunch agrarian romantic, who believed that the most important attribute of agriculture was the moral, individual and spiritual benefit which it conveyed to the individual. The recommendations and projects of the CL were inappropriate and often outdated and redundant. Their endeavours were noted and appreciated by farmers, but their work had no lasting effect on agriculture in Ontario. The official concept of 'conservation', defined by the CCC, was based on efficient management of Canadian natural resources, including the soil. In reality, the CL interpreted conservation to mean the preservation of a vanishing rural lifestyle.

## RÉSUMÉ:

La Commission de Conservation du Canada (CCC) a été créée en 1909 pour agir comme organe avisé auprès du premier ministre libéral Wilfrid Laurier. Au nombre de ses huit comités chargés chacun de la gestion d'une ressource naturelle spécifique, le Comité sur les terres (CT) était composé de membres incapables d'accepter ou de comprendre les changements auxquels était confrontée l'agriculture à l'aube du vingtième siècle. Le Dr. James Robertson, président du CT, était un romantique fidèle aux valeurs de la terre, convaincu des bénéfices moraux, individuels et spirituels qu'elle apportait. Les recommandations et projets du CT étaient souvent inappropriés, mal adaptés à leur époque ou redondants. Les efforts de ses membres furent appréciés par les fermiers, mais leur travail n'a eu aucun effet durable sur l'agriculture ontarienne. Le concept officiel de «conservation», tel que défini par la CCC, se fondait sur la gestion efficace des ressources naturelles canadiennes, incluant la terre, mais fut en fait interprété par le CT comme un moyen de préserver le mode de vie agricole en voie de disparition.

The Canadian government of Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier created the Conservation Commission of Canada (CCC) in May 1909. It was mandated to oversee the conservation and judicious use of the natural resources of Canada, and to this end, the CCC was divided into eight committees. Each committee dealt with a specific natural resource: fisheries, game and fur-bearing animals, forests, lands, minerals, waters and water-powers, public health, and the press and co-operating organizations.<sup>1</sup> The Chairman of the CCC was Clifford Sifton who, as Minister of the Interior, had actively encouraged conservation measures in areas under federal jurisdiction. He had been one of three Canadian delegates to the North American Conservation Conference of 1909.<sup>2</sup> Although other committees were chaired and made up of experts in their respective fields of interest, the Committee on Lands (CL) did not include working farmers from any farming community anywhere in Canada. Instead, its members were politically important agrarian idealists and romantic intellectuals who concentrated more on the sociology than the science of rural life. These men neither accepted nor understood contemporary Ontario agriculture as an intellectual, businesslike occupation, although contemporary farmers and farm leaders used the principles of scientific agriculture.

The official concept of "conservation", as defined by the CCC, was based on the restoration and management of Canadian natural resources, including the soil. The CL interpreted conservation to mean the protection of a vanishing rural lifestyle, largely by maintaining small mixed farms which were operated by single families through the promotion of techniques which were inefficient and out of date. The CL, through its Chair and spokesman Dr. James Robertson, stressed the positive ideological value of such farms. Farmers and their families would benefit from living and working close to the land and to God, and Canadian society as a whole would be stronger from resting on a solid foundation of rural honesty, virtue and hard work. Early in his career as an agriculturalist, Robertson had gravitated towards education, business and administration, and away from practical farming.<sup>3</sup> This in itself was a good thing, because he made many important contributions to Canadian agricultural institutions; however, he was unequipped to head a committee which was mandated to study the management of a physical resource and its relationship with farm management.

On the other hand, farmers in the 1910s realized that agriculture had to become fully integrated into Canadian society: economically, socially and politically. Separate rural and urban sectors could

not co-exist if Canada was to move successfully into the twentieth century. Ontario farmers were specializing according to local geographic and climatic conditions, usually by concentrating on a certain type of livestock, or by eliminating livestock from the farm plan.<sup>4</sup> Large farms, co-operative marketing groups, expert advice from provincial and federal departments of agriculture: these were some of the tactics used by the modern farmer to succeed in an increasingly industrialized society. Many farmers embraced this evolution in agriculture, because profitability demanded contact with urban industrial Canada through economic transactions. At the same time, farmers paid close attention to soil and water conservation through various soil management practices and cropping systems, because in the long term, it was profitable.

The juxtaposition of idealized country living and actual farming is ancient. Agrarianism, the belief that agriculture and rural life have a positive impact on society, has two faces: romantic or idealistic, and rational or realistic.<sup>5</sup> Romantics and realists are philosophically distinct. Rational agrarians, or agrarian realists, "stress the tangible contributions agriculture and rural people make to a nation's economic and political well-being." Conversely, romantic agrarians, or agrarian idealists, "emphasize the moral, emotional, and spiritual benefits agriculture and rural life convey to the individual."<sup>6</sup> In Ontario in the 1910s, the CL had limited impact on agriculture because the idealistic romantic philosophy of its members was incompatible with the reality of farming.

The North American conservation movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries began in the United States. It was influenced by European policies regarding the use of scarce natural resources, especially forestry in Germany. President Theodore Roosevelt convened the First National Conservation Conference in February 1909 because he believed that natural resources ought to be managed efficiently, by the state, on behalf of the public. Invited representatives of the governments of Canada, Newfoundland and Mexico attended, but even as public management in the spirit of progressivism was on the conference table, the interests of business and industry were accelerated by the onset of war. Prime Minister Laurier had already outlined a series of committees on fisheries, mines and minerals, and forests and waters: natural resources which were important to Canada.<sup>7</sup> Before a Canadian plan for natural resource management could be finalized, the conference recommended that each participating government establish a permanent Conservation Commission, similar to the

American model.<sup>8</sup> On 19 May 1909, an Act Establishing the Commission of Conservation was assented to in Ottawa.<sup>9</sup> The CCC had no legislative authority, and was answerable directly to the Prime Minister. Its mandate was based solidly in the doctrine of efficient utilization of natural resources.<sup>10</sup> Although agriculture was an important facet of the economy in every region of Canada, it faced stiff competition for land and labour from industry and housing, especially in Ontario. The CCC assumed the task of monitoring essential resources for the maintenance of a sound economy, to ensure the prosperity of all Canadian citizens. Business and economics were therefore as important to the CCC as was science.

The establishment of a Committee on Lands stemmed directly from the Declaration of Principles of the North American Conservation Conference of 1909.<sup>11</sup> Robert Borden had used conservation in his election platform of 1908, but he did not mention lands or soils. Likewise, Wilfrid Laurier had omitted lands and soils from his proposed committees on Canadian natural resources, which he had originally recommended just before the Conference. The CL was created to oversee the conservation of agricultural resources, specifically the "substance and fertility of the soil, while taking a liberal toll of crops for our own sustenance and improvement."<sup>12</sup> Its long-term objectives were clearly defined in the first annual report, following a year of consultation. They were, in summary, the survey and classification of all agricultural lands and soils, crops, weeds and other pests, natural fertilizers, water supplies and fuels and other natural sources of power on farms.<sup>13</sup> Land and soil resources would be catalogued in order for the government to regulate their use. Committee members presumed that any legislation enacted to regulate the activities of an individual farmer would be difficult to enforce, and therefore the CL assumed an educational capacity, furnishing information and guidance to Canada's farm population.

The committee members themselves were appointed by Clifford Sifton on approval by the government of Canada. He believed strongly in the "gospel of efficiency" with respect to natural resource development: that is, judicious, comprehensive management of resources to supply contemporary needs as well as reserves for the future.<sup>14</sup> The Chairman of the CL was Dr. James W. Robertson, principal of Macdonald College at Ste. Anne de Bellevue, Quebec. His impressive credentials included serving as Director (with J.A. Ruddick) of the Dairy School in Eastern Ontario. Concurrent with his chairmanship of the CL, he chaired the Royal Com-

mission on Industrial Training and Technical Education. He had collaborated with Sir William C. Macdonald to develop a technical, or applied, education system for rural Quebec. Macdonald Institute at Guelph and Macdonald College at Ste. Anne de Bellevue (where he had served as principal) had grown out of the Macdonald College Movement, which trained teachers for rural schools. He and Macdonald had collaborated to found the Macdonald-Robertson Seed Growers' Association, in 1903, which encouraged the production and general use of seed of superior quality for farm crops.<sup>15</sup> He had also been a Professor of Dairying at the Ontario Agricultural College (OAC) at Guelph, and at New York College of Agriculture, Cornell University, researcher at the Central Experimental Farm at Ottawa, and Federal Commissioner of Agriculture and Dairying for the Canadian government.

Robertson's experience impressed Clifford Sifton and Wilfrid Laurier, who appointed him Chair of the CL. It cannot be assumed however that because he held these positions he was familiar with applied agriculture. At the beginning of the twentieth century in Ontario, agriculture was changing dramatically. At agricultural colleges like OAC, chemistry and botany were part of the curriculum, and much emphasis was placed on field work. Both the federal and provincial governments employed specialists in every aspect of agricultural science, to conduct experiments at their research facilities, and interpret the results for farmers. Farmers too founded professional organizations. Livestock associations, including the Holstein-Friesian Association of Canada (1892), the Dominion Shorthorn Breeders' Association (1886) and the Canadian Cattle Breeders' Association (Quebec, 1895) attracted wealthy and influential stockmen. In 1859, the Ontario Fruit Growers' Association was formed.<sup>16</sup> Through these peer groups, farmers honed their agricultural skills. Robertson's professional strengths lay in education and administration, not in agricultural science.<sup>17</sup>

Robertson was born on a farm in Scotland. He emigrated to rural Ontario at the age of 18, and decided within a few years to pursue the business end of agriculture: he went to work in a cheese factory.<sup>18</sup> With regard to education, he believed that schools should "make the people like rural life and also enable them to make it more profitable;" some people, however, would never be suited to rural life, for perfectly valid reasons.<sup>19</sup> He wrote a short volume entitled *The Satisfaction of Country Life*, which was advertised in the *Report of the Commission on Country Life* as part of the young farmer's practical library. He also prepared *Conservation of Life in*

*Rural Districts*. This was copyrighted by the Young Men's Christian Association, and was an essay in which Robertson presented his romantic philosophy of agrarianism.<sup>20</sup> His writings manifested a sociological preoccupation with rural life, especially the rural family, similar to that of the Country Life movement. He believed that applied, or technical, education would keep the family together, and also provide competent leaders for the agricultural population. This was explicit in the text of his speech on Macdonald College to the National Education Association in July 1909:

The work carried on at Macdonald College consists of instruction in the three fundamental, mothering occupations which nurture the race: first, farming, whereby man becomes a partner with the Almighty and, thru [sic] cooperation with nature, obtains the benefactions of Providence for food, clothing, and shelter; secondly, the making of homes; thirdly, the teaching of children.<sup>21</sup>

Robertson brought this romantic agrarianism, along with his lack of scientific and technical expertise, to the CL. He belonged to the two movements which pervaded North American rural society at the turn of the century: the 'scientific agriculture' movement, and the 'Country Life' movement. Philosophically, they were diametrically opposed, and it is his affiliation with both which has caused confusion about his role in the CL. The 'scientific agriculture' movement was based on scientific principles taught at agricultural colleges like OAC and Macdonald College. It made the most of information gleaned through experiments designed to solve problems in animal and crop production. The quantities of data collected led to experimental design and statistical analysis in agriculture. Moreover, not every researcher was a professional. Contributors included the roughly 5000 members of the Ontario Agricultural and Experimental Union. These farmers cultivated test plots during the summer, and then gathered to compare and discuss results at OAC during the winter.<sup>22</sup> Tom Nesmith, in his PhD thesis "The Philosophy of Agriculture: the Promise of the Intellect in Ontario Farming, 1835-1914", construed scientific agriculture to mean 'intellectual agriculture' which required thoughtful interpretation of information to solve a specific problem.<sup>23</sup> The CCC, and specifically the CL, was created to use statistics to manage the agricultural resources of Canada. Its first major project, an inventory, cooperated with working farmers to supply the raw data.<sup>24</sup>

In contrast to the intellectual agriculture movement and the CL, however, the American Country Life movement and its Canadian

counterpart, the Macdonald-Robertson movement for rural education, dealt largely with social issues. In its report of 1911, the Commission on Country Life argued for better recreational facilities, more churches, and an improved transportation network in the countryside, while overlooking economic issues which farmers found important. Historian David B. Danbom has offered a rather more cynical interpretation of the motives of the Country Lifers, which he argues were the industrialization of agriculture to supply urban America with cheap food, thus subsidizing American industry.<sup>25</sup> Unlike the Country Lifers, Robertson did not strive to reform agriculture; in fact, he wanted nothing more than to maintain the status quo of the 1890s, when mixed farming guaranteed rural insularity and prosperity. Rather than integrating twentieth-century farmers into the Canadian economy, he tried to ensure their separateness, self-sufficiency and self-respect. Robertson's romantic agrarianism was as unjust to twentieth-century farmers as the more cynical Country Life Movement.

The official Committee on Lands included four other members besides Robertson. The Reverend Dr. George Bryce was a faculty member at the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, and President of the Royal Society of Canada. He had been head of the Department of Sciences at the University of Manitoba, where he taught biology and geology. The Hon. Sydney Fisher was the federal Minister of Agriculture; he had attended the first National Conservation Conference as part of the Canadian delegation. During the late 1800s, he had co-founded the *Association des arboriculteurs québécois*, which actively promoted reforestation and orchard establishment. He was also the owner of a very productive farm near Knowlton, Quebec. Dr. W.J. Rutherford was the Deputy Minister of Agriculture and faculty member at the University of Saskatchewan at Regina. No one from the Ontario Agricultural College at Guelph, Ontario, was included on the CL. Lastly, the Hon. Benjamin Rogers was the Lieutenant-Governor of Prince Edward Island between 1910 and 1915. His background is an enigma. A Benjamin Bickley Rogers published numerous volumes during the first two decades of the twentieth century; they included numerous translations and commentaries on the works of the ancient Greek playwright Aristophanes. This man was a scholar in Greek literature. This information is not conclusive about the identity of the Hon. Benjamin Rogers, but if indeed this is the same man who was appointed to the CL, his appointment further corroborates the theory that the



committee consisted mainly of academics and politicians who had little or no expertise in practical farming.<sup>26</sup>

The composition of the CL must be understood in the context of government and administration in the early 1900s. In the first place, legislative control over provincial natural resources was not obtained by all the provinces of Canada until 1930, although Ontario was one of those which did manage its own natural resources. The newer provinces – Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta — were still negotiating a policy with the federal government.<sup>27</sup> The CCC and all of its committees consisted of administrators, politicians and educators, as well as natural resource experts. This reflected a general philosophy in Canadian government that was just beginning to change. In 1916, an Honourary Advisory Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (National Research Council, or NRC), wherein scientists dealt with staff, budget and research, was created. Until then, “the idea that a public service spending public funds should deal with their own staff and budget according to their own wisdom, without a single government official to guide and direct them, was a novelty of the first order.”<sup>28</sup> Those members of the CL who taught agriculture – Bryce and Rutherford – were not farmers, and it is unlikely they had much time to spend ‘walking the fields’. Therefore, the exclusion of agricultural experts and farmers from the membership of the CL was not unique at that time, although the other committees of the CCC had experts as well as administrators.<sup>29</sup> This reinforces the conclusion of Michel Girard, in *L'écologisme retrouvé*, that the members of the CL were all either too busy with other projects, insufficiently qualified in the area of agriculture to make a meaningful contribution to the committee, or too far away to attend even the annual meetings.

F.C. Nunnick, B.S.A., was the committee's agriculturalist and a graduate of OAC. He embodied the struggle between the new science of agriculture and the old self-sufficient, self-contained rural community. Like Robertson, he asserted that the protection of Canada's lands, and the conservation of their fertility, could best be achieved through education. His own university training served him well; he prepared the questionnaires which were used in the farm surveys, and he compiled and summarized the information for publication in the annual reports. He prepared many short articles for distribution to the press, and publication in *Conservation*, the periodical of the CCC. Unlike other members of the CL, Nunnick increasingly stressed the business of scientific agriculture through his writings in the annual reports and in *Conservation*. He

was more in touch with the reality of farming, having spent several years as a student at OAC among farmers' sons. He read the questionnaires when they were returned at the end of the summer, and he compiled the data and wrote the reports. By 1916, the CL had completed all its projects except those of special regional significance. F.C. Nunnick had already turned to promoting careful book-keeping as one way of introducing profitability to the farm. He alone tried to introduce the scientific objectivity into the work of the CL which Clifford Sifton had mandated for the CCC.<sup>30</sup>

Many working farmers in Ontario were doubtful about the significance and relevance of the activities of the CL. In 1915, the editor of the *Farmer's Advocate*, a rural newspaper with an extensive readership in Ontario, called for a national agricultural commission to study transportation, finance and commerce in relation to agriculture.<sup>31</sup> The editorial predicted that disastrous "soil-mining" would occur if labour and marketing problems could not be overcome. The newspaper criticized the CCC and previous commissions as "cemeteries for knotty projects" and "joke[s]". The *Farmer's Advocate* argued that the proposed national commission should be non-partisan, representing "farming interests from coast to coast". As far as membership was concerned, it called for "professors if they are the best men, but consider the man first." This statement summarized perfectly the obstacle which the CL faced in dealing with the problems of agriculture — its members were not farmers, nor did they understand farmers' interests.

From the mid-1910s in Ontario, the cause of rural social reform was taken up by provincial farmer-politicians like W.C. Good and E.C. Drury who were both delegates to the Conference of Rural Life and Work, held at OAC in Guelph in 1915. The conference resolved that "if the rural problem of Ontario is ever to be solved it must be done by those men and women resident in the rural districts who have been born and brought up in these districts."<sup>32</sup> As much as he admired rural life, James Robertson did not fit these criteria, and he did not attend the conference. Its agenda included economics and labour, but also education, religion and women in the country, the very issues which were so dear to his heart.

The work of the CL began with a detailed inventory of crop and soil management systems on selected farms in the southern part of the province. New Ontario, or the region approximately north of North Bay and Sudbury, was not included. The survey was distributed to farmers in six counties — Dundas, Lanark, Ontario, Waterloo, Norfolk and Essex. These counties were situated in well-established

agricultural areas of the province; selection criteria were never documented in the annual reports.<sup>33</sup> The farm survey, begun in a limited way in August 1910, was expanded every year, until the final survey in the summer of 1915.

Numerous issues were covered in the survey, and F.C. Nunnick was firm in his conclusion that Ontario farmers lacked only the knowledge they needed to improve their farms, not the interest or the willingness to work hard. He reported that they did not understand the value of perennial legume crops such as clovers and alfalfa which added nitrogen to the soil, reduced soil erosion, and reduced winter kill when they were underseeded in grain. They paid too little attention to seed grading and selection. As a result, weeds and seed-borne diseases like smut spread from farm to farm. Manure was carelessly handled. Although it was often the only fertilizer used, very few farmers stored it in a shed or cellar to prevent wasteful and potentially contaminating runoff.

"Systematic rotation" was important to good farming and essential to soil conservation, according to the CL and agricultural scientists alike. The term was never clearly defined in any of the annual reports, although its benefits were clearly understood.<sup>34</sup> The 1911 survey of the CL recommended the following rotations: hoe crop/grain/hay; hoe crop/grain/hay/pasture; hoe crop/grain/ grain/hay; or hoe crop/grain/grain/hay/pasture. No provision was made in this series for fruit or vegetable crops.<sup>35</sup>

As a result of the broad scope of the annual surveys, the annual reports of the CL were very general and inconclusive with regard to the improvement of farming in Ontario. The CL concentrated its attention on a few issues of importance to all farmers, but its recommendations were for small mixed farmers only. Weeds represented the greatest loss to productivity in all parts of Canada. Other pests, for example insects and diseases, were of minimal concern to the farmers surveyed. The CL reported that fruits and vegetables were most susceptible to insect and disease damage, and that these crops were of little importance to Ontario farmers.<sup>36</sup> Such a verdict ignored specialized fruit and vegetable farmers and government scientists (federal and provincial) working on disease and pest control.<sup>37</sup> This omission underscored an important weakness of the CL. Its members failed to recognize the enormous new field of horticulture which was very successful in certain areas of the province. Instead, they focussed on that vanishing species, the so-called self-sufficient mixed farmer. American agricultural historian David B. Danbom found that this class of farmer could not survive

industrialization and the specialization of agriculture which was in place by 1930 in the United States.<sup>38</sup> In Canada, the CL persisted in addressing this class of mixed farmers to the exclusion of specialists.

The CL initiated its most successful project, the illustration farms, to address social and economic dissatisfaction in rural Ontario and to educate farmers about scientific agriculture. Illustration farms were designated in districts within the counties where an agricultural survey had been conducted. They were all mixed farms, chosen by the Neighbourhood Improvement Association on the basis of the personality of the farmer and the exemplary qualities of his farm. With the advisory assistance of the CL, these farms became showcases for efficient and profitable mixed farming. In Ontario, eight illustration farms were chosen for the three-year term 1912 through 1914, and a provisional contract was signed by the farmer and a representative of the CL. The farmer, who was already farming according to soil conservation and mixed farming techniques advocated by the CL, agreed to practice the most profitable system of agriculture and to keep records of his activities. The CL agreed to provide regular advice and to assist the farmer in obtaining the best seed grain and adequate cover crop seed, as well as in carrying out after-harvest cultivation.<sup>39</sup> The CL granted a small subsidy to each illustration farm (an average of \$78 annually) to cover these extra costs.<sup>40</sup> By the end of 1915, 23 of 24 illustration farmers in the eastern provinces had submitted a report; they all enthusiastically endorsed the project.<sup>41</sup>

The CL considered the project a huge success.<sup>42</sup> The work was designed to promote conservation on the farm by efficient use and minimal waste of commodities like seed, natural soil fertility, time, effort, and manpower. The project enabled the CL to promote intelligent mixed farming which involved planning, interpreting results, and integrating new information to improve productivity. It was practical and profit-oriented, and all participating farmers reported equal or increased fertility and profitability. Actual results of the illustration farms were not compiled and published because they were meant to be studied and copied within their immediate neighbourhood of 30 to 40 farmers only. The results of the study showed that the majority of farmers were willing to incorporate more conservation practices as prescribed by the CL into their operations.

James Robertson had high hopes for an illustration county, which was to be the culmination of all survey and field work of the

CL. It would have sweeping ramifications for all aspects of Canadian life:

It is important for Canada, that her people should be employed advantageously on land and that people should live happily and contentedly thereon. The whole nation would find home and foreign trade increased as a result. Its population would be perennially invigorated, financially, physically, mentally, and morally by the practice of the very best farming and the enjoyment of the very best conditions for life in the open country.<sup>43</sup>

Dundas county was chosen in 1914; its proximity to Ottawa made it possible for farmers to visit the Central Experimental Station, even though most of the survey and illustration work of the CL was not done nearby. As a first step, Dundas county was surveyed by a third-year OAC student who personally visited each of the 400 farmers chosen by the CL.<sup>44</sup> The illustration work, which would deal with such issues as farm labour, co-operation in carrying out farm work, roads and transportation, education, and opportunities for recreation and the development of a richer social life, was planned to begin in the spring of 1917, with the assistance of the provincial District Representative for Dundas county.<sup>45</sup>

Illustration county farmers were to follow a plan similar to that used on illustration farms across the country. Most of the work undertaken needed several years to show meaningful results, but by 1919, the CCC had reached the end of its effective tenure. The annual report of 1918 briefly described the work completed the previous year: the illustration of better farming methods on 16 farms, the adoption of labour-saving methods wherever possible, the introduction of systematic farm accounting, and co-operative buying and selling.<sup>46</sup> These projects were vague, and similar to work which had been initiated and carried out by OAC and the Ontario Department of Agriculture for years.<sup>47</sup> By 1919, the effect of liming the land on a clover crop, and yield comparisons between high- and low-density seeding of clover, were beginning to show. Unfortunately, wet weather spoiled much of the work.<sup>48</sup> In 1920, the CL held a conference on Conservation of Soil Fertility and Soil Fibre in Winnipeg. In his opening address, James Robertson mentioned the ongoing work in the illustration county; at that time, it still had two years to go of the five-year period for which it was undertaken.<sup>49</sup> The illustration county work was never completed.

The CL undertook other projects of more limited scope. In 1911 the CL began an investigation into the successful production of

alfalfa in Quebec that eventually expanded to include eastern Ontario and the Maritimes. This work consisted of on-farm illustration plots, and the results, although inconclusive, showed that alfalfa could be successfully grown under certain management and climatic conditions.<sup>50</sup> Similar work was in progress at OAC in conjunction with the Ontario Department of Agriculture.<sup>51</sup> In yet another survey, the CL sent out 200 questionnaires to prominent farmers all over Canada in an attempt to determine how much livestock should be kept to supply sufficient manure, and how much clover should be seeded down to ensure permanent soil fertility. The responses indicated that both animal and green manure were underused as soil amendments.<sup>52</sup> The CL failed to note that as farming had become specialized, many farmers limited the number of livestock to animals kept for personal use (transportation and consumption) only. Adequate supplies of manure were not readily available to them. Intercropping or companion cropping with clover was not feasible with many crops, especially perennials. Valuable as these bulky organic manures were to the soil, some farmers were of necessity moving toward commercial fertilizers, especially phosphorus. The annual report of 1917 contained three articles on chemical and natural fertilizers.<sup>53</sup>

The CL, although it had a strong mandate at the beginning of its term, did not achieve its projected goals except for the inventory which was accomplished through the surveys. It contributed no comprehensive recommendations to Canadian agriculture, despite its focus on productivity and fertility. In fact, it even neglected some very important innovations in Ontario agriculture. Horticulture was ignored in the surveys and in the illustration farm project. Ensiled field corn, a new and expanding crop for use as stored animal feed, received scant attention. Instead, the CL focussed on alfalfa, which had been introduced to Ontario in the late 1800s, and which was still fraught with production, hardiness and quality problems.<sup>54</sup> To be sure, alfalfa enriched the soil by adding nitrogen, and it could be ploughed under as a green manure after several years. Corn, on the other hand, needed to be heavily fertilized. But the reality of farming was that experts and experienced farmers all recommended corn because of its potential for high, dependable yields.<sup>55</sup>

In spite of its narrow focus on mixed farms, the CL might have completed some meaningful field work if it had communicated with other agricultural organizations. The federal government annually published the *Agricultural Gazette* that described ongoing

projects in its various departments. This journal also included work done by provincial governments. Between 1909 and 1921, the *Agricultural Gazette* did not mention the CCC. Similarly, Robertson did not appear to be in communication with the Ontario Department of Agriculture. The department's annual report of 1913 announced a new federal grant of ten million dollars for distribution to the provinces over ten years to be spent on instruction and demonstration work. For the first year, Ontario proposed to spend its allocation on District Representatives and their work, agriculture in the public schools, educational work in connection with marketing of farm products, new facilities at OAC, and a series of specific extension projects. In subsequent years, the budget for this money was similar, but it was never alluded to in the annual reports of the CCC.<sup>56</sup> In fact, the CCC was regarded with suspicion and animosity by many federal politicians.<sup>57</sup>

James Robertson and the CL also seemed unaware of the important research work being done at model or demonstration farms in Ontario. The federal government itself had a network of experimental farms across the country which tested innovations in scientific agriculture.<sup>58</sup> The Ontario government had established farms in all parts of the province, to conduct research specific to that geographical zone. These locations included Thunder Bay, Monteith (north of North Bay), Vineland, and Guelph. The District Representatives of the Ontario Department of Agriculture had an extensive on-farm demonstration agenda every summer; moreover, the competitions which they ran (for example, Acre Profit) were open to the public. Their results were published every year in the annual report. Even the *Farmer's Advocate* had a continuing demonstration orchard in Middlesex county near London.

In the spring of 1915, demonstration work was transferred from the CCC to the Dominion Department of Agriculture, Division of Illustration Stations, headquartered at the Central Experimental Farm in Ottawa. The illustration farms of the CCC were discontinued and the experimental farms of the Department of Agriculture were employed to a greater extent. After 1918, the CL became essentially non-functional; its contributions to the annual reports between 1918 and 1921 were insignificant. The newly formed National Research Council (NRC) was responsible for financing research projects, mostly at Canadian universities. Research in biological sciences, including agriculture, did not earn many of their support dollars; most of these went towards studies in applied chemistry and physics.<sup>59</sup> The CCC struggled on for several more

years, and was quietly terminated at the spring session of parliament in May 1921.<sup>60</sup>

In the interval from 1909–1919, during which the CCC published 10 annual reports, the CL was never engaged in innovative or useful work on soil conservation. James Robertson had misinterpreted its mandate. His serious shortcomings were the result of his sincere conviction that the rural home and family, in fellowship with educators and the clergy, should safeguard the simplicity and spirituality of rural life. In an age when town and country were becoming more and more dependent on each other, Robertson denied their affiliation. He favoured a partnership between God and farmers who would serve mankind through tilling the soil. He was familiar with agricultural education, through his involvement with the Macdonald-Robertson movement, and his association with OAC and other agricultural colleges. He understood the aim of the conservation movement to eliminate the waste of natural resources. Instead of implementing scientific methodology to improve soil conservation, he called for “the perpetual well-being of an intelligent people animated by good-will and rooted in land well-tilled and beautiful...wherein dwelleth righteousness”.<sup>61</sup> His vision was of a national agrarian community which would live and prosper in a pastoral setting: truly unrealistic in the twentieth century.

Other factors outside the immediate influence of the members of the CL and the parent CCC affected the commission. The creation of the CCC had responded to the interests of politicians and specialists for the public management of certain natural resources whose exploitation was becoming more controversial as industry grew. For example, forests and nearby communities in both the Maritime provinces and Ontario were threatened annually by fires caused by trains and by the sloppy practices of lumber companies. The Committee on Forests endeavoured to reduce wasteful and hazardous practices by proposing regulations governing the activities of the railway companies and the loggers, as well as their liability for losses.<sup>62</sup> Likewise, Canadian waterways were the subject of major concern by government engineers, and therefore, the Committee on Waters and Water-Powers was formed to study pollution, as well as analyse water flow for use by industries on both sides of the Canadian-American border.<sup>63</sup> In contrast, the CL was not created in response to pressure from scientific agriculturalists or specialists. The *Farmer's Advocate* prepared an editorial in June 1909 (immediately following the formation of the CCC) in which



it summarized recent scanty federal legislation concerning agriculture, but did not mention the CCC at all.<sup>64</sup> Without a lobby group behind it, especially one affiliated with industrial interests, the CL had no influence with government.

World War I had a critical impact on the CCC and the CL, and on Canadian agriculture. The various committees were disrupted and demoralized as personnel left to enlist or visit enlisted relatives. Food production in Canada increased in response to political encouragement and the demands of war, and skyrocketing prices gave an artificial impression of prosperity on the farm. This temporary prosperity did not ease labour shortages, or relieve the bitterness over the conscription of young rural men.<sup>65</sup> These issues simply moved farmers and politicians further apart.

James Robertson and the CL, with a national audience and national markets, missed a golden opportunity to promote the new scientific/intellectual agriculture, and promote integration into modern Canadian industrial society. F.J. Thorpe, in an introductory essay to the "Resources for Tomorrow" Conference, 1961, stated that the agriculturalists of the CCC did not seriously consider the fundamentals of agricultural economics, and their relationship to the economy as a whole and to the economics of resource development in general.<sup>66</sup> In other words, they regarded the farm community as an isolated facet of Canadian society, as producers only, not as consumers, and certainly not as business colleagues of urban industrialists. The CL also neglected to call on urban Canada to assume some responsibility for soil conservation, or for the unsatisfactory economic state of agriculture in Canada. Even though the committee structure hindered the exchange of ideas between CCC members, they could have discussed common issues at least once a year, when they met for their annual meeting. The annual reports give no evidence that this occurred; each committee gave its own separate report. As a result, even though farmers were responsible for feeding the whole of society, they were expected to shoulder the cost of it themselves, while other industries enjoyed profits.

On a technological level, the work of the CL was not very useful. Similar work was carried on by other groups (federal and provincial departments of agriculture and private groups like the *Farmer's Advocate*) which were much more thorough in communicating with all agricultural districts of the province. Many of the newest innovations of scientific agriculture were omitted by the CL. Furthermore, the CL neglected areas of the province, such as the north, and groups of specialized farmers, which were long estab-

lished in Ontario. On a sociological level, its influence is debatable. James Robertson left a huge legacy of work behind, all of which directly or indirectly improved the quality of farm life. His generous donations of time and money contributed to the formation of the Canadian Seed Growers' Association in 1904. The Seed Control Acts of 1905 and 1911, and the Canada Seeds Act of 1923, followed thereafter.<sup>67</sup>

Romantic agrarianism in Canada is a movement which merits some serious academic attention, even though it failed to influence Canadian agriculture and rural life on a large scale in the 1910s. No champion of modern romantic agrarianism has emerged in Canada to replace James Robertson, although in the United States, Wendell Berry's complicated philosophy of farming and living preaches a nurturing mentality of farming, which is part of an ideal agrarian culture. In recent years, a North American back-to-the-land movement, promoted by *Harrowsmith* magazine, for example, has become a common way for urban folk to escape the city. The editor of *Harrowsmith* called it a forum for national communication on "alternatives to bigness and urban living." This has strong parallels to early twentieth century romantic agrarianism.<sup>68</sup>

In the meantime, realistic agrarians have persisted as working farmers. Since 1921, Ontario farmers have continued to practice the doctrine of efficiency within their individual agribusinesses. Some have continued to specialize in crops like fruit or vegetables, while others have chosen to diversify in cash crops, or crop and livestock operations. The choice depends mostly on the geography and climate of the region, but also on the personal preference and expertise of the individual farmer. Realistic agrarianism has succeeded in an integrated modern society.

## NOTES

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- 39 CCAR 1913, 140–145.
- 40 CCAR 1916, 140.
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- 43 CCAR 1915, 209.
- 44 CCAR 1917, 211–217. The results of the first year of the illustration county project are tabulated, 219–226.
- 45 CCAR 1915, 208–209, 217–218.
- 46 CCAR 1918, 172–173.
- 47 *The Report of the Minister of Agriculture*, Province of Ontario (hereafter cited as RMAO) annually summarized accounts of the extension work of their various departments, including OAC. As an example, RMAO 1911 contained the following: Ontario Agricultural and Experimental Union had 5000 members and 2000 plots at OAC, 9–10; Ontario Department of Agriculture held 132 drainage demonstrations with an average attendance of 24, 13; the Schools Division of the Ontario Agricultural and Experimental Union provided seed and seedlings for school gardens, June excursions to OAC, and corresponded with OAC for information and advice, 14; the Bureau of Industries published and distributed crop reports and general agricultural information through the Women's Institutes and Farmers' Institutes, 20–21; the Farmers' Institute Branch directed the work of the Farmers' Institutes, Women's Institutes, Farmers' Clubs, Short Courses, Dairy Instruction and Inspection and the Eastern Dairy School, 28; the District Representatives (later renamed Agricultural Representatives or Ag Reps) were active in the province, 42.
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