

Two Ontario Liberals

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Two Ontario Liberals

It has never been easy to be an Ontario Liberal. That is the common theme which runs through Joseph Schull's two recent volumes on Edward Blake and Margaret Prang's thick single one on Newton Rowell.¹ To read the two biographies in conjunction is to be struck by the similarities between the circumstances with which the two Liberal politicians, one of the nineteenth century, one of the twentieth, had to cope, as well as by some significant differences which illustrate not only their contrasting characters and backgrounds but also the evolution of Canadian political life and problems from Confederation to World War II.

Neither of the biographies gives much indication of why the two men were Liberals, except that their families were. The Blakes were Liberals because despite their membership in the Toronto Anglican professional class they were "out" with the Baldwins rather than "in" with the Compact. The Rowells were Liberals because they were Western Ontario Methodist farmers. Blake and Rowell both spent most of their political lives in opposition, the former to Macdonald's powerful Conservative party in Ottawa, the latter to the equally powerful Whitney-Hearst Conservatives in Toronto. Through both their careers runs a hint of displacement, of always being on the outside looking in. Perhaps that is why when they did gain office, they were neither very comfortable or very successful in it. Schull has subtitled the first volume of his study of Blake "The Man of the Other Way", and the same phrase well describes the high-minded Rowell. Both men were politicians, but both were also men of principle who found political manoeuvrings more than a little distasteful and so on occasion let their party — and perhaps themselves — down.

Edward Blake and Newton Rowell were men of Ontario. Rowell knew a bit of the prairies and British Columbia from travels there; Blake knew a bit of Quebec from summering at Murray Bay; neither knew much of the Maritime provinces. Their lives, their homes, and their ideas were rooted in English-speaking, Protestant Ontario, and their view of Canada was, inevitably, an Ontario view. By no means, however, were their interests and visions limited to their own province. Blake and Rowell both chose (Rowell rather later in the game) to become federal politicians, for they knew that the fulfilment of the goals and ideals of Ontario demanded a national arena. Ontario wished to be the model for the nation; of necessity, then, men of Ontario had to know, to try to understand, or at least to cope with, the rest of the country.

1 Joseph Schull, *Edward Blake: The Man of the Other Way 1833-1881* (Toronto, Macmillan, 1975) and *Edward Blake: Leader and Exile 1881-1912* (Toronto, Macmillan, 1976); Margaret Prang, *N. W. Rowell: Ontario Nationalist* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1975).

Throughout the fifty years, from 1867 to 1920, which encompassed the political careers of these two men, the expansion and settlement of the West was one of Ontario's central preoccupations. Blake, as a leader of the federal Liberal party in the 1870s and 1880s, opposed not only politically but intellectually Macdonald's dream of rapid westward expansion by means of railway building. He wished to see the West developed and colonized, certainly, and the Mackenzie government of which he was intermittently a mainstay did continue to build rail lines during the 1870s, but for Blake the centre, the Ontario heartland, always came first. To him it seemed obvious that a compact eastern base should be firmly consolidated before the country began to reach out too far. Slow, solid progress to the Pacific would be in the best interests of both Ontario *and* the West. Rowell, acting in the early twentieth-century context of a rush of immigrants of many languages to the prairies, had one primary concern — that those immigrants should be Christianized and Canadianized (to him the two sides of the same coin) so that the prairie provinces would, when mature, be as similar as possible to the model of Anglo-Saxon Ontario. For the nineteenth and the twentieth-century politicians the context differed but the focus remained the same: Ontario's way of life was to be central to the definition of the Canada of the future.

For both Blake and Rowell, home was not only Ontario, but more specifically bustling, commercial Toronto, ever-eyeing the possibilities of extending its trade routes north and west and south. Typically Torontonians, the two politicians combined love and loyalty for Britain with a definite openness toward trade and other ties with the United States. Blake was a firm opponent of the tariffs of the National Policy on the grounds that they hurt the common man, created monopolies and divided East from West; he saw no harm, indeed quite the opposite, in expanding commercial links with the U.S. But he was not averse to revenue tariffs which gave Canadian manufacturers "incidental protection" either, because he knew that Canada needed revenue, and in later years, as he saw Toronto and Ontario becoming increasingly dependent upon industry, he was quick to accept the fact that the National Policy structure could never be removed. Thus he led the attack from within the Liberal Party on the Unrestricted Reciprocity plank, and pointed the way to the essentially status quo position the party adopted on tariffs by 1895. Rowell, as a Laurier enthusiast and the farmers' friend, was an ardent proponent of reciprocity in 1911. He too, however, later recognized that free trade had become a political and practical impossibility for an increasingly industrialized Canada, and through the tariff debates of the 1920s cautiously advocated a "stable" and "moderate" tariff which would not disrupt the uneasy harmony between East and West.

The West presented its difficulties and challenges for Ontario. It was coping with Quebec, however, which really made the life of the Ontario Liberal politician precarious. In the late nineteenth century, hopeless as it

so often seemed, the federal Liberal party had ever to keep in mind the possibility of wooing Quebec away from Macdonald. In the twentieth century, with that goal accomplished, it must constantly struggle to keep both English and French Canadian voters reasonably happy with Liberalism. But what was an Ontario Liberal to do when an issue of the emotional intensity of Riel or separate schools or Jesuit Estates or conscription reared its ugly head? How could men like Blake and Rowell, whose beliefs were Ontario's beliefs and whose politics were Ontario's politics, but concur with Ontario's views? How could they, on the other hand, as men of some breadth of vision and as politicians, fail to be tempted to use such issues to topple the Conservatives? Undeniably Blake was the more successful of the two in walking this particular tightrope. While insisting that "we can't make a platform out of a scaffold" he was able to help frame moderate positions on touchy cultural and religious questions which, while they enabled no immediate gains for his party and antagonized his own constituents, did help provide the basis for the strength of the party under his anointed successor, Laurier. Blake's "softness" on Quebec may have destroyed his own position as an Ontario politician, but so many other factors, such as his personal uncertainties, his open opposition to his party on Unrestricted Reciprocity and his decision to accept an Irish Home Rule seat in the British Parliament came into his final abandonment of Canadian politics that the issue of Quebec can be considered only one of many. Rowell, on the other hand, clearly did wreck his political career on this obstacle — not by being "soft" on Quebec but by quite the opposite. His deep commitment to maximum Canadian effort in World War I, the product of his belief that this was a war for democracy and British civilization in which Canada had as much at stake as any nation, blinded him to any understanding of those who opposed conscription, whether within Quebec or elsewhere. By leading the pro-conscription Liberals into the Union Government in 1917 Rowell broke with Laurier and ended all chance that he would ever again be an acceptable Liberal leader, even in Ontario. Both Blake and Rowell were able politicians, but neither was a good party man. Blake damaged both himself and his party on the shoals of his doubts and dallyings; Rowell did the same on the rocks of his firm principles. Blake lived out the last twenty years of his life with regrets, but Rowell, his biographer tells us, had none. He believed that he had done what was right and that was enough.

Blake and Rowell were both, in their own ways, Canadian nationalists, and their relative positions portray the slow and steady alteration in the relationship between Canada and Britain in their years. Blake was the classic imperial federationist of the 1870s. Strongly attached to the ideals of the British Empire, he nevertheless wished to see Canada take a greater share in the burden of spreading those ideals worldwide — a process which he believed would help build up the national sentiment which the young country so lacked.

Considered “utterly visionary” at the time², his views were to be shared by many Canadians by the end of the century, by which time Blake himself had rejected the idea of imperial federation and spoke instead of an “Independent Canadian Commonwealth.” The consistency in Blake’s position lay in his resentment of British airs of superiority and of British ignorance of Canadian priorities, but in his simultaneous feeling of a common bond—most especially through the common British law — among all British countries. Newton Rowell’s position evolved from Blake’s. Never an imperial federationist but rather an early advocate of the seemingly paradoxical concept of an independent Canada within a British family of nations, he was happy to see the Commonwealth created in the 1920s but distressed at Mackenzie King’s policy of ignoring it as much as possible. Rowell was a nationalist but not of the isolationist stream which dominated his party in the inter-war years. On the contrary, his enthusiasm for the League of Nations paralleled that for the Commonwealth; his was one of the few Liberal voices in the 1930s to call continually for active Canadian leadership in both international organizations. Neither Blake nor Rowell was completely typical of the Liberal party of his day on national-imperial issues. Blake was rather more independentist than most of his associates, Rowell rather more interested in international links, but both their positions were well within the wide, slowly changing spectrum which Liberal nationalism encompassed during Canada’s first seventy-five years.

Perhaps the greatest contrast between Edward Blake and Newton Rowell was with respect to social issues. Blake was more typically the nineteenth-century liberal, preoccupied with economy and efficiency in government and in business. He possessed a very highly developed sense of duty, almost of *noblesse oblige*, and he was active in the service of the University of Toronto, but there is little indication of any interest in the developing social problems of late nineteenth-century Canada. Rowell was a liberal of the twentieth century. While not of the radical part of the social gospel wing of the Methodist Church of Canada, Rowell was nevertheless very much involved in the moral and social reform movements which so moved that Church. From the time he was a young man he worked with the inner city Metropolitan Church in Toronto, throughout his career he made prohibition a central political issue, from early on he was open to the problems of labour and to such progressive reforms as workmen’s compensation, factory inspection, social insurance, female suffrage and tax reform. He made many enemies as a result, even within his own party, among those who resented the somewhat patronizing lectures of this “uplifter” with the prosperous practice and the big house

2 W. R. Graham, “Liberal Nationalism in the 1870s”, *Canadian Historical Association Annual Report* (1946), p. 108.

in Rosedale. Rowell was a conservative social reformer, still hoping that the old rural values could be imposed upon urban Canada, but he helped to lead the Liberal party to an awareness that a response to the problems of the new age was the duty of a modern political party.

The careers of Edward Blake and Newton Rowell were in many ways tragic. Both were brilliant, hard-working and successful lawyers, but much as they loved the law, it was not enough for them. Both drove themselves to exhaustion and unhappiness in politics, impelled by overdeveloped concepts of duty, and by ambition. They both failed to become the leaders they might have been; Blake because of his troubled, enigmatic personality, Rowell because of his inability to compromise on fundamental issues. Both were able politicians, but they were not politicians to the core; personal misgivings, higher duties and loftier principles overrode the purely political in them, and in the end drove them out of Canadian political life.

The recent biographies of these two men, the first complete studies of either, are remarkably different in style and tone. Schull's is discursive, wordy, too often reportorial rather than analytical. Prang's is excessively detailed and complete, solidly and definitively academic in its prose. The subjects of the biographies too were very different; they were men of different ages, backgrounds and personalities. But running through the two careers ran the single stream of Ontario Liberal nationalism, gradually eroding all obstacles in its path, changing course when confronted by the immovable, and so, by the end of Rowell's years, almost completely dominating Canadian political life.

MARY VIPOND

How Ontario Achieved Its Imperial Position

Perhaps Ontario is the only province that is truly satisfied with its economic circumstances within Confederation. Ontario, of course, began with certain natural advantages: a central location, a rich agricultural resource base in Southern Ontario, the transportation economies deriving from the St. Lawrence - Great Lakes waterway. But, since 1867, the province's political leaders have also been very adroit in exploiting these natural advantages and in ensuring that national policies and institutions have evolved to meet the needs of the provincial economy. When Ontario's paramount position has appeared threatened, its political leaders have roused the powerful business community of Toronto and its allies in the communications media with the cry of a threat to the *national* interest. This has usually been enough to cow political leaders in other parts of the country, particularly those who wished to have a career in federal politics. The process by which Ontario attained its