

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

THE DEVELOPMENT OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL

IDEAS IN THE PROVINCE OF CANADA,

1848-58

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ABSTRACT

The decade following the European revolutions of 1848 was a watershed in Canadian intellectual history. That period has traditionally been described by political historians as one of exciting political ferment, producing the ideological components of modern Canadian liberalism, and after the political realignment of 1854, a conservative political combination that was to dominate Canadian politics for a half-century. This view of the eighteen-fifties has, however, ignored a whole substratum of political assumptions and attitudes held by the politicians and their partisan press. A close examination of these reveals a political culture of decidedly different proportions.

The dynamic thrust of Canadian ideas came more often from social rather than political sources. Ultramontanism, Protestant evangelicalism, nationalism, racism, and anti-Americanism were all emergent forms of social romanticism, which expressed, in radically new terms, Canadian popular aspirations. Their plural and dialectical form of expression, especially in the popular press, effectively changed the role of the politicians. The function of the political system was less and less a forum for the expression and reconciliation of ideological opposites than a sociological safety-valve for social ferment.

After a brief flurry of rejuvenated radicalism with the appearance of rougeism and clear-grittism in the late eighteen-forties and early fifties, Canadian politics settled into an "era of good feelings." The political thought of the next decade was beset by a whiggish complacency and compromise which denied the place of divisive ideology

upon fundamental questions of political and social theory. The politics of consensus dictated that ideological conservatism, such as English Canadian toryism, and ideological liberalism such as French Canadian rougeism had to seek out the no man's land of whiggery. The period was not the cradle of Canadian party democracy, but its whig casket.

The whiggism of the eighteen-fifties presented an open form of eclectic compromise which promised to absorb Canada's pluralism. It had achieved its purpose in the eighteen-forties by opening the constitutional system to popular power through responsible government and legal reform. It now promised to open the entire political process into a free-wheeling contest for power by political coalitions and interest-group politics. Economic action was relieved by whiggery of the moral restraints which early toryism or liberal-democracy had placed upon it. Whiggism also promised to smother Canada's increasing social diversity with its constitutional tolerance and its racial monism. Federalism represented the spirit of the former, and the folk-myths of anglo-saxon and northern racism the latter. The irony of the whig vision was that its open-myth structure was ultimately too restrictive. It deprived the political system of ideological tension, it maintained an undemocratic form of capitalism, and it stood, more often than not, for the ascendancy of English over French Canadians.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
VITA	i
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ii
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER	
I. CANADA VIEWS EUROPE	7
English Canada: Whiggery and Splendid Isolation	
French Canada: Liberalism, Catholicism, and Romanticism	
II. THE CANADIAN IMAGE OF THE UNITED STATES	118
Manifest Destiny and American Expansionism	
American Society and Politics	
American Constitutions and Institutions	
III. ATTITUDES TO EMPIRE: THE LOYALTY CRISES OF 1849	215
Canada West: The Rise of Imperial Sentiment	
French Canada: Loyalty and Nationality	
IV. THE DIVIDED EMPIRE - IMPERIAL SENTIMENT AND THE CHALLENGE OF NATIONAL INTEREST, 1850-58	269
The Crimean War, 1854-56	
The Indian Mutiny, 1857-58	
V. NATIONALITY AND RACE IN MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY CANADA	331
Dualism: The National Political Style	
Pluralism: The Social Challenge	
VI. POLITICAL AND SOCIETAL IDEALS OF THE CANADIAN POLITICAL ELITE	409
Political and Societal Ethics--Pragmatism, Progress and Patrician Virtue	
The Idea of Political Party--Canada West	
--Canada East	
VII. CONCLUSION	495
BIBLIOGRAPHY	504

INTRODUCTION

Mid-nineteenth century Canadian ideas have had a limited and partisan historiography. On the one hand, the familiar whig view of Canadian political history has stressed, to the exclusion of social and economic development, the constitutional and institutional development of the United Province. On the other, the conservative or tory historian has been preoccupied mainly with the politicians' major triumphs and minor defeats. Anti-historicist by nature, the tory view has forsaken apotheosis for caricature. An entire generation's political activity has been reduced by it to the Rabelaisian revelation of Allan MacNab that his politics were railways.

Both views are by turn fortifying and entertaining, but both are historically limiting. Professor Cornell has been able, for example, to explode one of the caricatures of this period, "the loose-fish," by a careful analysis of legislative voting behaviour.¹ An equally valid question which might be asked of the politicians in this period is what they regarded as their function in the political process, or indeed, how they viewed their total environment. It may be possible to test by an analysis of political and social attitudes the hypothesis that Professor Cornell poses in his conclusion, that "party rivalry did not represent any deep and fundamental division among Canadians."²

The clarification of Canadian value systems has been, by and

¹P. Cornell, The Alignment of Political Groups in Canada, 1841-67 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), pp. 83-86.

²Ibid., p. 83.

large, confined to contemporary sociology and political studies. For the nineteenth century there are a few oases in a desert of historical scarcity. For the eighteen-fifties in particular there are a number of suggestive but incomplete analyses of political and social attitudes. Both J. M. S. Careless and B. W. Hodgins have demonstrated that Liberals and Conservatives were conservative in their conception of society and politics.³ But they have, either by the narrowness of the sample or attitude studied left a wealth of mid-century values unturned. What Canadians thought of such momentous world-events as the Revolutions of 1848 or the Crimean War, or conceived of their place in the North American continent and the Empire has gone largely unexamined.⁴ While a supposedly insular American historical tradition has had its occasional Daniel Boorstin, Louis Hartz, or Sidney Hook to delineate a peculiar American Weltanschauung,⁵ Canadian history has been slow to probe its national psychology.

The nineteenth century newspaper is an excellent, but largely untapped resource of that intellectual heritage. Generally it has been only those newspapers with a direct association with politics that have had much historical stature in Canada. But, as Marshall McLuhan has

³See B. W. Hodgins, "Attitudes Towards Democracy in the Pre-Confederation Decade," (unpublished Master's thesis, Queen's University, 1955); J. M. S. Careless, "Mid-Victorian Liberalism in Central Canadian Newspapers," Can. Hist. Review, XXXI (Sept., 1950), 221-36.

⁴See S. F. Wise, "The Annexation Movement and its Effect on Canadian Opinion," in S. F. Wise and R. C. Brown, Canada Views the United States (Toronto: Macmillan, 1967), pp. 44-97.

⁵See, for example, D. J. Boorstin, The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964); L. Hartz, The Liberal Tradition in America (New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1955); S. Hook, American Philosophers at Work (New York: Criterion, 1956).

pointed out, the nineteenth century newspaper was the equivalent of the electronic media of the twentieth century. Its message, as he notes, was not individualist at all, but "a collective form of press mosaic, with its magical power to impose its own assumptions."⁶ The newspaper was at once the purveyor of nationalism and social realism. Nor was it any accident that the rapid expansion of the daily press coincided with not only the aspiration to national status, but also with its rapid realization.

As Professor Waite has pointed out, Confederation in 1867 would have been impossible without the political newspaper.⁷ While the Founding Fathers of the American Republic were most often wealthy patri-
cians, the Canadian founders were either small-town lawyers or journalists.⁸ Social as well as political reality was expressed through the press. The bourgeois commercial ethic ran throughout the advertisements of merchandise, property, and patent medicines. Realism was also reflected in the literary tastes of the period. News dispatches from Europe, the debates of the Provincial House, Dickens' novels, and Napoleon's Memoirs were all the vehicles of social and political realism, however romantic or heroic the form of the latter two might have been.

Newspapers were in short the highly charged carriers of

⁶ Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (New York: Signet Books, 1964), p. 192.

⁷ P. B. Waite, The Life and Times of Confederation, 1864-67: Politics, Newspapers, and the Union of British North America (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), p. 17.

⁸ See W. H. Kesterton, A History of Journalism in Canada (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1967), p. 37.

bourgeois reality, aspiration, and conscience. The peculiarity of the Canadian media was that there was little of the "sober second thought" in the form of literary journals.⁹ There were virtually no monthly or quarterly periodicals to counteract the impact of the mid-century press, which reached some two hundred in number by 1860. The Canadian political élite which controlled the daily newspapers were then injecting the narcosis of their values and assumptions directly into the blood-stream of the reading public.

By mid-century political attitudes were no longer the private judgment of a few literate politicians who had read and comprehended Blackstone, Burke, Maistre, Fox, or Jefferson. Rationality and logic, whether to conservative or to liberal ends, was not the form of newspaper persuasion. Hegel, Fourier, and Comte were not in their original form fit items for popular consumption. Rather it was the popularizers like Lamartine, Carlyle, and Bagehot, who persuaded empirically and historically that held newspaper audiences. By mid-century, ideology as a form of rational disquisition had given way to social didacticism and social romanticism. Marx, Carlyle, and Spencer were the purveyors of a new romanticism which was social rather than political in content, empirical rather than logical or rational in form.

Without raising too forcefully at this time the labyrinthine question of romanticism, it seems that a singular aspect of that complex movement may be applied to the mid-century climate of ideas in the North

⁹An exception was the short-lived Anglo-American Magazine. See F. Armstrong and Neil C. Hultin, "The Anglo-American Magazine Looks at Urban Upper Canada on the Eve of the Railway Era," in Profiles of a Province (Toronto: Ontario Historical Society, 1967), pp. 43-59.

Atlantic world. Because of its preference for the concrete over the universal, the complex over the simple, romanticism manifested itself in what one historian has called the atomization of European society:

The nineteenth century was to be eclectic in its architecture, pillaging the past for borrowed styles; it was to offer a "generous confusion" of modes in art and ideas; it divided into separate national cultures. It was a much more pluralistic civilization. Man was parcelled out in men, as the poet Rossetti put it.¹⁰

The mosaic pattern of thought which emerged out of this socially and culturally plural romanticism reinforced heavily the historical and empirical mode of thought which emerged from the popular press in the mid-nineteenth century.

The impact of all of these several forces in European intellectual development was profound for Canada. Unlike political liberalism or philosophic conservatism, social conservatism and romanticism allowed that European ideologies need no longer be applied dogmatically to a different context. Canadians were allowed to define themselves in a diverse social sense, as a single nation, as two nations or even more, should such a definition be empirically and historically warranted. Negative social definition was by the same empirical process as important now as the positive affirmation of classic conservative or liberal ideology had been in the early nineteenth century. To define oneself as a voluntarist was not so often a positive faith in the rational beauties of a separated church and state, but a negative faith derived from anti-Popery. In order to define oneself as an English Canadian by 1850, it was less important

¹⁰ R. Stromberg, European Intellectual History Since 1789 (New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, 1968), p. 41.

to extol the virtues of a superior constitution, than to say that one was not a French Canadian or an American. Similarly Canadian nationality as reflected in the Confederation Debates was an essay in empirical-social dialectics, not a rational discourse in political economy as were the Federalist Papers.¹¹

The uneven and eclectic character of mid-century Canadian thought fit well into the complex mosaic of European ideas after 1848. Canadians were neither "feudal" nor "enlightenment" remnants of European thought as Louis Hartz has suggested in his ambitious treatise on the Founding of New Societies.¹² Although Canadians rejected much in European societies and politics in a search after their own individual and collective identity, they still remained part of a European psychology. It is for this reason that this study begins with the European revolutions of 1848 as its starting point. It terminates a decade later in 1858 because of the increasingly inward cast of Canadian attitudes on Europe and the Empire, and the increasing preoccupation of Canadians with the internal problems of sectional and federalism. The chronological limits of this study are not intended, however, to apply restrictive limits to intellectual trends that extend back into the eighteen-forties or forward into the eighteen-sixties and beyond. Rather, the intention of this work is to identify a major watershed in Canadian ideas that was apparent after eighteen forty-eight and forty-nine.

¹¹This idea is suggested in W. L. Morton, "The Conservative Principle in Confederation," LXXI, Queen's Quarterly (Winter, 1964), 528-47.

¹²L. Hartz, et al., The Founding of New Societies (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1964), pp. 3-122.

CHAPTER I

CANADA VIEWS EUROPE (1848-58)

Both English and French Canadians were generally convinced of the environmental uniqueness of North America and the societies it bred. European societies were always too despotic or too democratic, too priest-ridden or too agnostic, too wealthy or too poor. English Canadians may have prided themselves on their imperial attachments, and French Canadians may have taken an increasing pride in their cultural debt to France but they did not consciously ape the internal cultural norms of their parent cultures. As much as Americans took pride in their distinction from the corrupted European family after their revolution, so Canadians had come to regard themselves, albeit somewhat more quietly, as chosen peoples.

As Louis Hartz has observed in his classic work upon the American Liberal Tradition, the ideological spectrum in colonial and former colonial societies is a narrow one.¹ Mid-nineteenth century Canada generally conforms to the Hartzian model. When the revolutions of 1848 burst upon their limited intellectual horizons, Canadians did not fragment into an equal number of political factions such as roamed the streets of Paris or even those contained in the Provisional Government of Lamartine. Instead, a rapid consensus emerged from both English and French Canada that was unique and roughly homogenous in each section. If single adjectives could be used to describe the journalistic response

¹L. Hartz, The American Liberal Tradition (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1955).

of each section, it would be "whiggish" in the case of English Canada, and "liberal-Catholic" in French Canada. Both views of revolution were considerably to the left of legitimist reaction in Eastern Europe and considerably to the right of Parisian socialism.

Unlike the first French Revolution of 1789 which was greeted with a uniform conservative reaction in the fledgling British colonies of Upper and Lower Canada, the revolutions of 1848 fell upon more fertile soil.² Conservative assumptions on revolution had eroded to such an extent by mid-century that those which remained had become self-conscious recitations of eighteenth century European reaction. Simcoe, Inglis, and Hubert had been capable of glosses upon Burke, or even later, Maistre, in remote isolation. But the old Tories and the ultra-montanes of the mid-nineteenth century were not. The vital, instinctual element in Canadian political thought had moved to many of the whiggish premises that Hartz has described so well in American political culture of the nineteenth century. The elite of the Canadian provinces were no longer frightened backwoods aristocracy or churchmen but outward-looking and prosperous bourgeois prepared to emerge as confidently from the cocoon of Empire as had the American colonials of 1776.

Violence was generally eschewed in Canada of 1848 because the

²For the reaction to the earlier revolution, see M. Wade, "Quebec and the French Revolution," C.H.R., XXXI (Dec., 1950), 345-68; M. Brunet, "La Revolution Francais sur les rives du St. Laurent," R.H.A.F., XI (Sept., 1957), 155-62; B. Sulte, "Les Projets de 1793-1810," T.R.S.C., (Third Series), V (1911), 19-67; Journal and Proc. of Legis. Assemb. and Council of Upper Canada, 1793, 1794, cited in A. Fraser (ed.), Seventh Report of the Bureau of Archives for the Province of Ontario (Toronto, 1909-11), pp. 15-37; E. A. Cruikshank (ed.), The Correspondence of J. G. Simcoe (Toronto: Ont. Hist. Society, 1925), III, 101, 187-89; IV, 16, 17, 158, 187, 311; S. F. Wise, "Sermon Literature and Canadian Intellectual History," United Church Bulletin, XVIII (1965), 3-18.

Canadian reformers felt that they had collectively shaken the tree in 1837, and were confidently waiting for the fruit to fall. When therefore the European revolutions reached this elite, they found one which by and large accepted the futuristic promise of revolution, but not its practical reality. Proudhon's agents, if they had existed, would have been as unwelcome as the earlier agent David McLane, who, in 1796, was hung and quartered in the town of Quebec. But, as a categorical abstraction "revolution" found considerably more sympathy in 1848 than either McLane or the spirit of democratic revolution. More often than not, though, the sympathy that was extended to the revolutionary ideal was the futuristic outlook of whig-liberalism (which always deals in the "old causes" of the past or the new causes of the future). Whenever the millenium appeared threatened by the clumsy hands of demagogues and radical socialists, it was generally agreed that it was time to stop and consolidate the promises of the early revolution.

Europe was not only important as a sounding board or mirror for Canadian political attitudes to revolution, but also as a source of intellectual sustenance. English Canadians often cited British political or constitutional precedent for their ideas and actions, ranging as far and wide as Burke, Blackstone, Fox, and Peel, and the Chartists. French Canadians of the right, left and centre variously cited Pius IX, Aquinas, Louis Veuillot, Montalembert, or Lamartine, Lammenais, and Guizot to justify and amplify their own political beliefs. Even the current pejoratives popular in Europe survived the trip across the Atlantic, and resumed their customary virulence in the hands of the political right. The clear-grits and rouges were often designated

"socialists," "atheists," and "anarchists" despite their protestations to the contrary. The left, interestingly, did not resort to socialist forms of declamation and stayed instead well within the bounds of eighteenth century democratic terminology. Often they were even content with the epithets of seventeenth century whiggery.

What was more significant than the aggregate of continental names and nicknames used by Canadians was their lack of contextual relevance. Burke and Blackstone might be employed as far left as William Lyon Mackenzie, and the traditions of whiggery might be indiscriminately mixed with those of liberalism and even Chartism by the clear-grits. Peel and Wellington might similarly appear as the darlings of both liberals and conservatives. Although the extremes between political and philosophical traditions were somewhat sharper in French than in English Canada, there was a deliberate blunting even there of the sharpness of French political thought. Lamartine was the toast of both the French Canadian left and the right, and the conservative liberalism of Guizot might be misapplied in a liberal-democratic and even republican context. One of the fundamental causes of this purposeful distortion of European ideologies was the uniqueness of the Canadian political and social experience. The political left, as observed above, was merely a stone's throw across an artificial boundary from the political right. Nationalist considerations served to make the political left and right inconsistent in the extreme. The dictates of commercial capitalism in the fifties made liberalism in either section of the province little different from conservatism in its first assumptions.

The third form of reference to the European political experience

^{2a}For a fuller definition of whiggism and its application to Canada, see supra, pp. 410-15.

was even more unconscious and vital than the second. There was an instinctual use of contemporary British or continental political traditions to resolve particular problems within Canada. The church-state question and responsible government issue were often justified during their resolution with ample reference to the whig political tradition. In Canada East, the abolition of seigneurial tenure was initiated by such pragmatic considerations as scarcity of land for commercial speculation, and resolved upon equally pragmatic terms of protecting vested seigneurial interests. But the form of debate gave some vital clues to this process, and to the total weltanschauung of the French Canadian political élite. It revealed for example that both sides in the debate were fundamentally agreed on a Lockean concept of property as their final point of compromise. Despite the cry of socialism and despite the Church this profound social issue was resolved then in a way not much different than it would have been resolved in the middle-class monarchy of Louis Philippe or the second Empire of Napoleon, or in the whiggish era of Peel and Palmerston.

The relatively greater use by Canadians of European as opposed to American styles and forms thus stands in direct contrast to their general assumption that their society was North American. This paradox perhaps suggests a need to perpetuate anti-Americanism by obscuring the apparent social and economic similarities of Canadian to American society. But the ease with which European precedents were substituted for American ones also suggests the universality of the bourgeois political culture in the North Atlantic world. Henry Adams' comment that there was an instinctive cousinship between the Boston "upper class bourgeoisie" of the eighteenth-thirties and the London of Peel, Macaulay, and Mill, and the Paris of

Louis Philippe, Guizot and Tocqueville might also apply to the urban élite of Montreal and Toronto in the fifties.³ Rouge and clear-grit, bleu and tory were two sides of the same commercial coin. For reasons of style they aspired to circulate with the more lustrous ideological currency of Europe, even though they knew full well that they were better off in the dollar area.

(i) English Canada: Whiggery and Splendid Isolation (1848-58)

The closest that English-Canadians came to abstract speculation on the nature of Canadian society and government was in their reflections upon the European Revolutions of 1848. The rapid oscillation of democratic and reactionary forces in those revolutions served as a distant laboratory experiment upon which they could gaze with olympian impunity. There was no apparent fear that those revolutions could shake the foundations of Canadian society, distant and different as it was from European society. This lack of engagement gave at least a façade of clinical objectivity which was certainly not apparent in their reflections upon American society. But, despite its relative paucity and isolationist detachment, Canadian comment still revealed many important assumptions on fundamental political and social change.

The left extreme of English Canadian opinion upon the revolutions of 1848 was marked by the whiggery of the Toronto Globe and the Montreal Pilot, and the right by the toryism of the Montreal Gazette. For the former, the via media of constitutional monarchy was revealed as the

³ See The Education of Henry Adams (New York: Modern Library, 1931), p. 33.