

The Study of the Provinces: A Review Article

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Provincial studies constitute a neglected field of academic research. The depression of the 1930's stimulated the belief that federalism was obsolete, and that centralization was the wave of the future. English-Canadian scholars accordingly concentrated on Ottawa and sided with the historical forces of centralization whose triumph they sought and predicted. They denigrated the provinces as reactionary and parochial. Aberhart, Hepburn, and Duplessis were paraded as living proof that demagoguery and attacks on civil liberties were all that could be expected at the provincial level. Strong support for centralization came from the left. Left-wing academics, mesmerized by the class-based two party system of the United Kingdom, predicted that Canada would follow the British example. Classes, organized on a national scale, would replace sections as the basis for partisan cleavage. The resultant decline in the significance of geographic divisions would strengthen central authority. The same centralist tendency was supported by the standard argument that the necessity for government planning of an interdependent national economy made provincial boundaries obsolete. The effective performance of the Liberal governments of King and St. Laurent from 1940 to 1957 provided helpful evidence by apparently confirming that centralization, administrative convenience, and competent economic management were interrelated. From a variety of perspectives, therefore, it was assumed that the provinces would decline in significance. Consequently, they neither deserved nor received much attention from the academic community.

English-Canadian historians assumed the nation-building mantle of Macdonald. The major history texts were written from the perspective of the nation as a whole. While sectional interests were included in historical explanations, they were viewed in terms of the problems they created for the centre, rather than in terms of the problems the centre created for them. The provinces were brought grudgingly into the picture when national unity was threatened, or national leadership thwarted by the strident pleas for provincial autonomy of some parish pump provincial politician. The advocates of provincial rights received little sympathy,

while the provincial bias of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council evoked an almost apoplectic fury in English-Canadian historical literature. Ramsay Cook's observations are relevant:

That Macdonald's determination to reduce the provinces to municipal status could have been a cause of national disunity, and that Mowat, Mercier, and the other provincial-rights exponents, then and since, might have been acting from legitimate cause, is a thought that certainly, and naturally, never crossed Macdonald's mind. That it seems not to have crossed the minds of English-Canadian historians either is perhaps not quite so natural.¹

The texts in Canadian politics display the same myopia. The recently published volumes by J. R. Mallory, *The Structure of Canadian Government*,² and R. J. Van Loon and M. S. Whittington, *The Canadian Political System*,³ explicitly focus on the central government, and virtually ignore the provinces. R. M. Dawson's *The Government of Canada*, now in its fifth edition, and entering its second quarter century, has consistently displayed a federal government focus, and espoused a centralist position. The first edition in 1947 noted the failure of the text to include "except incidentally, anything more than the Canadian federal or central government and its relations with the provinces."⁴ Twenty-three years later in 1970, the fifth edition, it was "frankly admitted, leans towards a 'one nation' and centralist view of the constitution."⁵

This textbook bias provides students with an English-Canadian interpretation of Canadian politics, and reduces the visibility of the French-Canadian impact on Canadian political life. The duality of the Canadian polity cannot be adequately portrayed by concentrating on Ottawa and

¹ Ramsay Cook, *The Maple Leaf Forever* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1971), p. 202. "Canadian historiography," wrote J. M. S. Careless, "has often dealt too wishfully with nationalism — and *ergo*, with unification — thus producing both expectations and discouragements out of keeping with realities. . . . There are the good guys and the bad, the unifying nation-builders and their foes; though one trouble is that the characters often change hats and whiskers in the French-language version." "Limited Identities' in Canada," *Canadian Historical Review*, 50 (1969), p. 1.

See also the introduction by W. Kilbourn to Paul G. Cornell, *et al*, *Canada: Unity in Diversity* (Toronto-Montreal: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967). The Cornell book is a deliberate exception to the standard centralized version, for "it focuses its primary attention on the diverse regions and cultures that have made up our rich and varied history." p. vii.

² J. R. Mallory, *The Structure of Canadian Government* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1971).

³ R. J. Van Loon and Michael S. Whittington, *The Canadian Political System* (Toronto: McGraw Hill, 1971).

⁴ R. M. Dawson, *The Government of Canada*, 5th ed., revised by Norman Ward (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), p. v.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

ignoring the province of Quebec. The approach of Louis Sabourin in his text for French-Canadian students, *Le Système politique du Canada*,⁶ deserves duplication in English texts. Sabourin allocates approximately one-quarter of his space to provincial, particularly Quebec, politics.⁷

The contradiction between the centralist bias of most English-Canadian interpretations and the decentralist reality of contemporary Canada requires a counter literature which explains the survival of the provinces, their present importance, and the manner of their functioning. Our knowledge of these matters is a shambles of confusion and contradiction. An explanation is necessary for the failure of the provinces to remain content with the low status assigned them by John A. Macdonald and his subsequent academic disciples.

The discrepancy between the Ottawa-centred vision of the intellectuals and the political reality of strong decentralizing forces was strikingly apparent in the depression of the thirties. Electorates supported Hepburn, Duplessis, and Aberhart. They threw out R. B. Bennett whose New Deal would have strengthened federal powers. Meanwhile in the magazines and academic journals a profusion of activist articles portrayed as inevitable and desirable a centralist panacea unattainable by democratic means.

It is evident that the dominance of centralist intellectuals in the public discussions of the past forty years has seriously prejudiced our understanding of the Canadian political system and its history. If the Canadian people, Careless quietly remarked, have not achieved the centralist vision of Canada held by historians and intellectuals, "it could be because their interests were elsewhere. . . . Accordingly, it might be worth investigating what their Canadian experience was, observing that it did not greatly focus on Ottawa and the deeds of hero federal politicians, or on the meagre symbols of some all-Canadian way of life."⁸

What is required, to cite Careless again, is academic concentration on the " 'limited identities' of region, culture and class . . . in this country of relatively weak nationalizing forces: a land of two languages, pluralized politics, and ethnic multiplicity, yet all so far contained within one dis-

⁶ Louis Sabourin (ed.), *Le Système politique du Canada* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1968).

⁷ At the lower levels of the education system, differences of focus and interpretation between French and English texts can be profound. See Marcel Trudel and Geneviève Jain, *Canadian History Textbooks: A Comparative Study* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1970) for an extremely useful analysis of differences in French and English history texts used at the elementary and secondary school level in Canada.

⁸ " 'Limited Identities'," pp. 2-3.

tinative frame of nation-state existence."⁹ The necessary approach will have to recognize the governmental pluralism of Canadian federalism, the significance of Quebec as a centrifugal factor, and the strength of decentralizing forces in English Canada.

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The development of provincial studies is hampered by the limited academic resources available. A flourishing academic sub-field requires multiple scholars working in the same research area. It is difficult, however, for small academic communities to sustain the concentration of scholarship necessary to generate conflicting research findings. A division of labour emerges which discourages alternative explanations of the same phenomenon. When so little is known, and resources are scarce, the duplication of research seems wasteful. The inevitable result is the creation of a monopoly situation in which the dominance of particular interpretations reflects the absence of alternatives.

This problem is especially acute at the provincial level. Even if social scientists and historians divided their attention equally between Ottawa and the provinces, there would still be ten times as many academics working on national politics as on the average province. In most cases, therefore, the task of interpreting the history and politics of a particular province devolves on a handful of scholars. This is an ideal situation for the appearance of monopolies of interpretation sheltered from the clash of competing explanations by which error is exposed.

These monopolies leave the reader defenceless. In these circumstances the possibility exists that what we have come to view as differences between provinces may be little more than differences in the values and perceptions of the academics who have studied them. S. M. Lipset, for example, argued that wheat farmers have been in the forefront of agrarian radicalism. The special position of the Saskatchewan farmer in the market, he asserted, rendered highly visible the forces by which he was oppressed, and consequently was an important stimulant to radical political action.¹⁰ The next door farmers of Alberta exposed to the Marxist

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3. In a review of W. S. MacNutt, *The Atlantic Provinces: The Emergence of Colonial Society, 1712-1857* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965), S. F. Wise extends this argument to the pre-confederation period by suggesting that historians should pay more attention to the differences between the diverse colonial societies of British North America before 1867. *Canadian Historical Review* 48 (1967), p. 67.

¹⁰ S. M. Lipset, *Agrarian Socialism* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1968), pp. 92, 90.

scrutiny of C. B. Macpherson, apparently possessed little of the clarity of vision of their Saskatchewan neighbours. Their agrarian and *petit-bourgeois* consciousness was incapable of comprehending their "essential class position." They had a "delusive" consciousness which did "not penetrate to the essentials of the independent commodity producer's position," a consciousness which was "incomplete and hence mistaken." Macpherson's *petit-bourgeois* farmers were inherently incapable of correctly perceiving the nature of the system which oppressed them. Consequently, with a "consciousness . . . at once hostile to and acquiescent in the established order" they were doomed to a perpetual frustrating "oscillation between radicalism and conservatism."¹¹ If Macpherson had studied Saskatchewan and Lipset Alberta would the picture be reversed? Would students and academics from coast to coast contrast clear-sighted Albertan farmers with the vacillating, property-obsessed farmers of Saskatchewan incapable of correctly analyzing their position in the market system?

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Students of provincial politics have been strongly attracted to protest movements and third parties. This is especially the case in the prairies where, with the exception of *The Liberal Party in Alberta* by L. G. Thomas,¹² book-length studies have concentrated on third parties at the expense of major parties. The effect of this research has been to underestimate the continuing strength of the old parties. Professor Denis Smith pointedly noted that from the published literature no one would suspect that the two old parties have gained more than half the prairie vote in all federal elections after 1921.¹³ They have also been stronger provincially than the literature implies. In Saskatchewan, the home of *Agrarian Socialism*, the combined old party vote in the nine elections from 1905-1938 only twice dropped below 60 per cent, and otherwise ranged from 69 to 99 per cent. Even in the eight elections commencing with the first C.C.F. victory in 1944 the combined old party vote has averaged 45.6 per cent.

The third party bias in prairie studies has exaggerated the degree of conflict between Ottawa and the prairie provinces, distracted attention from the internal cleavages in each province, reduced the visibility of intra-

¹¹ C. B. Macpherson, *Democracy in Alberta*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), pp. 227-29.

¹² L. G. Thomas, *The Liberal Party in Alberta* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959).

¹³ Denis Smith, "Liberals and Conservatives on the Prairies, 1917-1968," mimeo. A lecture to the Conference on the History of the Canadian Prairies, The University of Calgary, March 1, 1969, pp. 5-6.

provincial domestic political issues unrelated to federal policy, and underestimated the capacity of the major parties to retain prairie supporters. The general effect has been to stress sectional tension to the detriment of unifying factors.

A similar third party bias exists in studies of Quebec parties. A major academic study of the Union Nationale¹⁴ has been recently supplemented by an important book on Social Credit in Quebec.¹⁵ A second book on Quebec Social Credit has been announced.¹⁶ It is a safe speculation that far more academics are now doing research on the Parti Quebecois and the F.L.Q. than on the Liberal party which has been in power provincially for two thirds of the twentieth century, and which at the moment both wields provincial power and dominates Quebec's federal representation.

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Given the weak condition of provincial studies in Canada the recent publication of *Canadian Provincial Politics: The Party Systems of the Ten Provinces*,¹⁷ edited by Martin Robin, is a welcome event. For readers of *BC Studies* the chapter by the editor, "British Columbia: The Politics of Class Conflict," is of special interest. Professor Robin has written elsewhere on B.C. politics,¹⁸ and his massive two volume political history, *The Company Province*, is to be published by McClelland and Stewart.

As already noted, limited academic resources facilitate the creation of monopolistic interpretations at the provincial level. Although Professor Margaret Ormsby has produced an excellent general history of British Columbia,¹⁹ there is no dominant paradigm for interpreting the party system of the province. Given the two volume political history shortly to appear it is inevitable that Professor Robin's account will become exceedingly influential. His analysis will be readily accepted by those who cannot undertake their own research, or who may not be deeply interested in

¹⁴ Herbert F. Quinn, *The Union Nationale* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963).

¹⁵ Maurice Pinard, *The Rise of a Third Party: A Study in Crisis Politics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971).

¹⁶ Michael Stein, *Le Ralliement des Cr ditistes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming).

¹⁷ Martin Robin (ed.), *Canadian Provincial Politics: The Party Systems of the Ten Provinces* (Scarborough, Ont.: Prentice-Hall, 1972).

¹⁸ "The Social Basis of Party Politics in British Columbia," *Queen's Quarterly*, 72 (1966), reprinted in Hugh Thorburn (ed.), *Party Politics in Canada*, 2nd ed., (Scarborough, Ont.: Prentice-Hall, 1967).

¹⁹ Margaret A. Ormsby, *British Columbia: A History* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1958).

British Columbia, but have to give a lecture on B.C. politics to the freshman class at Memorial University. In these circumstances a detailed comment on his chapter in *Canadian Provincial Politics* may be of some interest. An analysis of his lengthy article constitutes a manageable way of assessing the usefulness of his interpretation of B.C. politics while awaiting the appearance of the forthcoming exhaustive study.

The prospect of a Martin Robin monopoly is disconcerting. His outstanding characteristic is carelessness. While his chances of getting a fact or a reference correct are somewhat better than random, he has a prodigious capacity to make mistakes, a capacity sufficient to elicit our awe if not our admiration. This is a serious criticism. It requires detailed documentation which may be tedious to the reader.

His handling of election data is typical of his cavalier attitude to facts. The figures for the 1903 election are incorrectly copied from Sanford with the effect of reducing the Conservative vote from 46.36% to 40% (p. 46). The 1924 provincial election did not occur in 1923 as the author twice states (pp. 34, 48). For the 1937 election he awarded the Liberals 38 seats, seven more than the Chief Electoral Officer could find (p. 49). For the 1966 election he distributed 56 seats in a 55 member assembly by giving an extra member to Social Credit (p. 58).

There are numerous mistakes in the author's quotations. Many of them are minor,²⁰ some are humorous, and all contribute to the impression of shoddy scholarship. He quotes Bruce Hutchison on the gentleman Tory farmers of the Okanagan running "the largest fruit industry in British Columbia," a significant scaling down of Hutchison's reference to "the largest fruit industry in the British Empire" (p. 33). The farmers who "live and cling to the soil" according to Robin's misquotation from another of Hutchison's books, actually "love and cling to the soil" (p. 34). The residents of the Cowichan valley, including those described by Bradley as "what is generically known as the younger son," are described in Robin's casual rendering of what purports to be a quote, as "what is generally known as the young son" (p. 33).

A category of miscellaneous mistakes further documents the scope of the author's capacity for error. The two representatives who protected

²⁰ The word "collective" is left out of the quote by Phillips on p. 30. The quote by Wood on p. 32 should be the "diversity of its farm occupations," not the "diversity of its occupations." The word "speculators" is substituted for "prospectors" in the MacNab quote in n. 30. "Constituencies" should be "constituents" in the Howay and Scholefield (incorrectly cited as Schofield) quote on pp. 43-4. Minor mistakes occur in the Dobie quote on p. 35, the Ormsby quote on p. 44, the Morton quote on p. 48, the Ormsby quote on p. 59, the Ormsby quote in n. 26, and the quotation cited from Sherman in n. 72. "Mr. Maclean" should be "Dr. MacLean" on p. 59.

the interests of the British Pacific Company were R. P. Rithet and H. D. Helmcken, not R. P. Bethel and Helmcken (p. 44). The percentage of B.C. farms indicated as part time should be 15.1%, not 50.9% as is stated (p. 32). Premier Johnson fired Finance Minister Anscomb in January 1952, not January 1951 (p. 51). Ernest Hansell, the Social Credit campaign leader in 1952 was a federal M.P. from Alberta, not a provincial M.L.A. from that province (p. 53). Sir Richard McBride died in 1917, not 1915 (p. 47). The "Kamloops Floating Bridge" is in Kelowna (p. 59). The Lions Gate Bridge, opened in 1938, was not built by the Social Credit government (p. 59). The slipshod piece of character assassination of John Perdue, a Social Credit candidate in the 1953 election, is not supported by the source Robin cites (p. 63). Numerous minor mistakes, particularly in footnotes, complete the catalogue of inaccuracies.²¹ Individually these mistakes are of little consequence, but cumulatively they add their contribution to the general impression of slovenly research.

It is evident that Professor Robin is not at home with research requiring the careful copying down of information from various sources, and its subsequent accurate reporting. He has difficulty with dates, names, titles, statistics and quotations. Facts bore him. His interests and skills lie elsewhere. He is at ease with the colourful embellishing of reality. In the realm of hyperbole where evidence is left far behind, and he is released from the hampering constraints of accuracy and objectivity, he gives free rein to his imagination, to his partisanship, and to his facility with the

²¹ A typical illustration of the author's capacity for confusion occurs when he cites the *Canadian Annual Review for 1901*, published in 1902, to support a statement about labour unions in 1903. The statement correctly refers to 1901 (pp. 46-7).

In n. 2 the author is Vernon H. Jensen, not Vernon J. Jensen. Stuart Jamieson is wrongly spelled Stewart Jamieson (n. 8 and n. 71). McPherson should be Macpherson (n. 11). Bradley's initials are A. G., not A. C. (n. 17). McGinnis should be McInnes (n. 38). J. Castwell Hopkins should be J. Castell Hopkins (n. 43). The middle name of E. G. Prior is Gawler, not Gowler (p. 45). The present N.D.P. leader is Barrett, not Barret (p. 68).

Macpherson's *Democracy in Alberta* was published in 1953, not 1935 (n. 11), and the Dobie article was published in 1936, not 1934 (n. 21). Perry's letter to Pattullo was written in 1931, not 1932 (n. 32), and the McInnes letter to Laurier was June 14, 1900, not 1903 (n. 38).

The Boag Foundation is incorrectly cited as the Boague Foundation (n. 3).

Page references are lacking in n. 3 for Phillips, and n. 35 for Ormsby. No source is given for the important Kirby quote in n. 3, and the important Smiley article is not identified in n. 67.

No Power Greater is wrongly titled *No Greater Power* on four occasions (notes 3, 6, 10, 74).

The Bradley reference in n. 17 should be pp. 409-10, not p. 382.

The above catalogue of inaccuracies could easily be extended, but presumably additional proof of slovenly scholarship is not required.

loaded phrase. His writing style proves George Orwell's assertion that "the worst thing one can do with words is to surrender to them."²²

Readers who dislike fine distinctions will find it comforting to note the absence of "on the one hand," and "on the other hand" of the careful academic. Professor Robin will appeal to those who find complexity intolerable. Unlike the vacillating Hamlets of academe, he does not hide behind the qualifying phrase. He has drained *Roget's Thesaurus* of its most colourful adjectives which he scatters with gay abandon across his pages.

Illustrations abound. He variously describes British Columbia as a "fractured community," (p. 35) and a "negative community . . . [which] . . . exists only in the negative conviction shared by many that coast society is somehow different from the larger Canadian society" (p. 37). It is also "a society rife with xenophobia, with anxieties and antagonisms between regions" (p. 36). The goal of politics is "material goods, pure and simple" (p. 39). B.C. is cursed with "a politics more corrupt than most in the country" (p. 39). Its patronage, low political morality, disregard for established procedures, absence of respect for civil liberties, and "accompanying mass resentment and apathy," produce in "some respects" a resemblance to "pre-revolutionary Quebec" (p. 38). It is a "society replete with ardent salesmen and devious manipulators" (p. 42). Its people are only "half-heartedly" attached to the Canadian federation (p. 27), but are imbued with "narcissistic idolatry" (p. 27) for their own fractured, negative, corrupt community. The complex factors behind decisions to migrate to B.C. are collapsed into the naive assertion that the province is "peopled by a mass of individuals who have escaped from communities from which, for one reason or another, they had become estranged" (p. 37).

British Columbia manages, somewhat incongruously, to have developed as "a corporate frontier," (p. 28) and to have a "ruggedly individualistic environment" (p. 31). It is of course a "company province," (p. 28) shot through with class conflict and characterized by ruthless exploitation of man and nature by "captains of industry," (p. 30) "fortune seekers, boodle hunters, and promoters with questionable pasts and devious ways," (p. 37) and "economic buccaneers" (p. 38). The "industrial magnates" have been in large measure successful in buying and manipulating governments (p. 38). On the other side, there is the exploited working class, the

²² Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (eds.), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Vol. IV (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 168.

unions, and the socialist movements which interpenetrate and entwine each other in different ways at different times, but implicitly represent the children of light whose goodness has not yet been given its appropriate political reward — power.

Professor Robin spends much time and space on curiously irrelevant comparisons. We are informed, for example, that a labour movement evolved in B.C. “stronger and more articulate than any in Western Canada” (p. 28). Few prairie farmers will be surprised. In one of the most curious sections of his article he devotes over four pages, one-tenth of his total space, to farmers. He laboriously concludes that they are politically impotent, numerically small, ideologically barren, and generally quite different from those of the three prairie provinces (pp. 31-5). While the conclusion is unexceptionable, it is not clear why so much space was devoted to the obvious.

The deplorable qualities of this article may reflect the author’s misguided belief that partisanship on behalf of ‘the people’ is an adequate substitute for scholarly competence. To this, the only reply is that left-wing scholarship is best served by good scholarship. The basic explanation of the article’s shortcomings, however, probably lies elsewhere. The desire to tell a story well, to provide a touch of drama, to inject theatrical skills into one’s writing — in brief, to perform in public — can contribute to stimulating academic publications. There is no inherent tension between social science and the desire for dramatic effect, but keeping them in harness is not the easiest of tasks. The failure to do so can be disastrous as Professor Robin convincingly illustrates.

To read this article is to be made aware of certain minimum requirements of a community of scholars. The first requirement is accuracy in the reporting of easily verifiable information. When errors multiply like rabbits the baffled reader is left to wonder what, if anything, he can believe. The second requirement is to take the task of analysis and interpretation seriously. The catchy phrases which cannot be pinned down, and the ‘good guys bad guys’ syndrome which caricatures reality, reduce academic discourse to demagoguery. One problem with demagogues is that they are entertaining. In an insidious way their overblown, broad brush distortions are fun. The academic demagogues pummel the world on the printed page. They provide illusions of mastery, and thus hold us back from the only effective mastery we can attain, that which comes from objective understanding painfully acquired.