

THE SERVANTS OF CLIO

Notes on Creighton & Groulx

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IT WAS NOT WITHOUT REASON that the ancients placed history under the patronage of the muses. For the great works of the servants of Clio belong as much to the realm of literary art as they do to the realm of science. There is, I suggest, an inevitability in this situation. For history, while its details can indeed be assembled with all the patience of a laboratory worker, can only be conceived in its entirety through an act of the imagination and can only be brought to plausible life through the resources of the literary craft. Indeed, there is a common realm where history and other forms of literature, such as drama and fiction, come together, and essentially it is only a different way of using the imagination to arrange the past that distinguishes Thucydides and Gibbon from, say, the Aeschylus of *The Persians* or the Shakespeare of *Henry V*. All of them deal with history; all of them mingle fact and conjecture in memorable forms whose appeal goes beyond a mere interest in the detail of events to an inspired apprehension of the shape of the past. This, of course, is why research can disprove what a great historian may say in terms of factual detail, and yet leave a work like *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* unassailed as a literary masterpiece, as a triumph of tragic vision. It is also why a historian like Spengler can be positively perverse in his selection and interpretation of facts and yet produce a vision so compelling and so fitting for its time that no degree of criticism can dispel the powerful and gloomy achievement of *The Decline of the West*, or greatly reduce its influence.

The great historians are important in literary terms not only for the lasting appeal of their major works, which continue to irradiate the imaginations of generations of readers, but also for the extent to which they contribute to the wider pattern of literature, not only by providing writers directly with dominant themes, but perhaps even more importantly by crystallizing collective myths, the myths of nations and the myths of movements. The Tory and the Whig view of English history were essentially mythical in character, and they were given form respectively by Clarendon and by Macaulay, to whom we owe respectively much of our sense of the English past as tradition and the same past as progress.

Gibbon's great panorama of the trajectory of Roman greatness helped, as did Vico's historical writings, to create a myth of cyclicality in the growth and decay of civilizations which has not only been echoed in varying ways by later historians like Spengler and Toynbee, but profoundly affects the way western man observes the life processes of his own institutions and may indeed help to produce the phenomena of cyclic decline because he expects and tends therefore to promote them.

Historians, in other words, not only present history. To a considerable degree, they make it, especially when their visions of past and present affect our hopes and even our sense of what is practicable in the future. As Edmund Wilson showed so ably in *To The Finland Station*, what actually happened on the European continent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was greatly affected by historical generalizations of Vico and Michelet which found their way into political action, filtered through the writings of Karl Marx and the actions of Lenin and his associates and predecessors.

In every culture that is conscious of itself as a living, and therefore growing or declining entity, there are historians who play the kind of role I have been describing, and who work beside the more strictly academic gatherers and arrangers of facts. They are the controversial historians whose interpretations are often assailed, but whose grand co-ordinating visions help to shape the way a people or a period will regard itself by giving it a plausible past. The younger cultures produce such historians as freely as the older ones; indeed, their emergence, like the emergence of literary criticism, is one of the signs that a culture is moving into the kind of mature self-consciousness that recognizes the need for conceptual forms, for a vision in which land and people, place and past, can be given recognizable shape in a myth that both explains and inspires. Frederick Jackson Turner's presentation of the concept of the frontier as a dominant influence on the evolution of American society and the American collective persona is one of the best-known examples from the New World. Although the American frontier culture — in so far as it ever existed — is burning out in the last wilderness of Alaska, Turner's theory, filtered through other historians and through journalistic representations of the past, continues to influence the way Americans see themselves and their society; it is partly responsible for the irritable defence of one's own mental and physical living place that makes American society so markedly more violent than Canadian.

Historians who are active in the creation of theories that develop into national — or even in the case of Spengler and Toynbee international — myths, are often accused of dealing cavalierly with the facts, of being dominated by preconception and — sometimes — by prejudice. Such accusations have often been brought — and not without justification — against the two Canadian historians, Donald Creighton and the late Lionel Groulx, who are the subjects of these notes. Yet it

can be argued that in the special way they handle factuality, such historians are presenting their own kind of actuality: the actuality of the self-images — collective and individual — by which a people act and which ultimately affect and modify the mundane facts of their existence.

Here, I suggest, a two-way process operates — a process which is a specialized version of Wilde's famous axiom about life imitating art. The mythologist-historian extracts from the past a chart of dominant trends — physical as well as psychological, intellectual as well as technological — and from this chart he detects an emergent current that projects itself into the future, so that he is not only telling us what we have been, but also foretelling what we may potentially be, and it is this quasi-prophetic element that most sharply distinguishes such a historian from others — Creighton, for example, from W. L. Morton among Canadian historians. And in so far as his charting of the course from past to future affects the thoughts and actions of people — as the chartings by both Creighton and Groulx to varying extents have done — he becomes a self-fulfilling prophet, and life imitates history in what — significantly — is its most artistic form.

DONALD CREIGHTON AND LIONEL GROULX share a great deal as well as their inclination to write history in a way that changes the present and affects the future through a myth-making interpretation of the past. Both have offered nationalist interpretations of the past, Creighton glorifying the trans-continental conception of the original Dominion-builders and Groulx glorifying the conception of Québec as a nation destined to defend Catholic values and verities.

Both are frankly partisan in their approaches, advocating, as a result of their historical analyses, specific courses of action. Groulx argued persistently that in order to survive, French Canadians must sustain their Catholic culture and also their racial purity; the dilution of the race even through marriage with English-speaking Catholics could — as he suggested in his novel, *L'Appel de la Race* — be fatal to Québecois integrity and the purity of the apostolic mission. Creighton, on the other hand, has argued — perhaps never more strongly than in a *Maclean's* article entitled "No More Concessions" (June 27, 1977) — that French Canadian particularism has prevented the Canadian nation from developing to maturity through "a successful determination to prevent Canada from becoming a nation and to perpetuate its colonial status," and on the basis of such arguments has advocated that in the last resort English Canada can survive without Québec while Québec without English Canada will rot in "a stagnant economic backwater of independence."

Both writers have created their characteristic myths. Creighton's is that of the commercial empire of the St. Lawrence which dominated the development of New France and which, before it expired in the mid-nineteenth century, had projected into the vast hinterland of the *pays d'en haut* the lines of trade and communication and eventually settlement and immigration which ensured that a trans-continental nation would emerge out of the divided colonies of British North America and sustain a different political and cultural existence — less individualist, more collectivist and traditional — from that of the American republic south of the border. Groulx's myth was that of a Catholic nation with an inspirational mission in the American continent, sustaining itself against vastly superior cultural odds to fulfil its splendid spiritual destiny.

In developing these myths each of the two historians had his predecessor, his intellectual guru. Creighton's master was H. A. Innis, especially the Innis of *The Fur Trade in Canada*, which contained the essential germ out of which — with Innis's encouragement — Creighton built the scenario of his first book, *The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence*. Creighton differed from Innis's other celebrated disciple — Marshall McLuhan — in that he put the master's tortuously expressed ideas into eloquent prose; McLuhan, unfortunately, inherited the obscurities of the Innis style, and used his master's insights, unlike Creighton, to construct a continental and even a cosmopolitan rather than a national vision. Groulx developed, though with a more sharply ultramontanist Catholicism and a more abrasive consciousness of race, a theme of *survivance* that had already been given eloquent exposition in François-Xavier Garneau's pioneer narrative of the formation and the continuance of French Canada (written in response to Durham's notorious assertion that the *canadiens* had neither history nor culture), *Histoire du Canada depuis sa découverte jusqu'à nos jours*, published in the 1840's. Stressing even more strongly than Garneau the continuity of Québécois culture, and introducing the theme of a constant struggle against a relentless pressure from English Canada, Groulx extends and elaborates the early historian's task of national justification in works like *La Naissance d'un race* (1919), *Notre maître le passé* (1924-44) and *Histoire du Canada française depuis la découverte* (1950-52).

Myths demand heroes, and both Creighton and Groulx found heroes fitting their requirements. Groulx chose, as the paladin in his dream of the Canadian past, the seventeenth-century soldier, Dollard des Ormeaux, who in 1660 led a forlorn hope of sixteen Frenchmen against the Iroquois and died defending an improvised fort at the Long Sault. Other Québécois historians, notably Gustave Lanctot, challenged the authenticity of Groulx's account of the incident in *Si Dollard revient* (1919), in which he sought to establish Dollard as a model of courageous resistance for contemporary Québécois, but he continued defending his position in later books, like *Le Dossier de Dollard* (1932) and as late as 1960

in *Dollard, est-il un mythe?* In fact, whatever the actual truth of his portrait of Dollard, Groulx's intent made his presentation a myth, as deliberately shaped as those Plato advocated for the achievement of a political end, in Groulx's case the raising of the spirit of resistance to what he saw as a deliberate English effort to stifle Québécois Catholic culture. In *Paroles à des étudiants* (1941) he actually called on students to pray for the coming of a great leader, as noble and dedicated as the Dollard he portrayed, who in the twentieth century would inspire the Québécois to fulfil the historic and apostolic destiny of their race.

Creighton chose a less obviously chivalric champion in Sir John A. Macdonald, and in his two massive volumes of biography, *The Young Politician* (1952) and *The Old Chieftain* (1955), he completed the first important study of the most interesting political personality Canada has yet produced. It is a book that demonstrates the degree of Creighton's literary artistry, for he shows his recognition that biography is a quite different craft from national history, and achieves that true balance between subject and background, between the private and the public, which is so difficult to sustain in a political biography. Yet he never attains, or even attempts, a total objectivity. His sympathies are openly and honestly expressed, and the other figures in the story are in one way or another diminished, so that Macdonald stands out in high relief, as a figure symbolic of the development of Canada, in which he played so active and central a part, and hence as a figure of mythic proportions, embodying on a grand scale the virtues and frailties of his people, forming his nation with a wayward intuitive wisdom, and in the end, at his death, becoming identified, in the last words of *The Old Chieftain*, with the land itself:

Beyond the dock lay the harbour and the islands which marked the end of the lowest of the Great Lakes; and beyond the islands the St. Lawrence River began its long journey to the sea.

The mythic and the heroic are intimately associated with the tragic, and the vision of Donald Creighton at the end of his career, like that of Lionel Groulx in his final years, has been darkened with a deep pessimism about the achievement of the glorious destiny as an independent nation that he once conceived, under the inspiration of its geographical vastness, for his country. And each of the two historians has discovered his particular tragic flaw in his nation's history to account for the disaster he sees impending. Groulx, who once declared that "entre beaucoup de façons d'aimer sa patrie, la meilleure, la plus féconde pour la patrie elle-même, c'est de l'aimer dans ses intérêts éternels, sa mission providentielle," lived long enough to see the rise in national consciousness which he so passionately desired take on a secular form and to realize that the young, who had once supported him, were now mocking his views on the necessary link between being a Québécois and being a devout Catholic of the ultramontanist

persuasion. The disenchantment which permeates Groulx's late book, *Chemins de l'avenir* (1960), is paralleled in Creighton's most recent historical work, *The Forked Road* (1976), an account of the Canadian years from 1939 to 1957, in which he sees the vast promise of Confederation negated or at least imperilled by the supine continentalism of the Liberals, by the inroads of provincialism, and by the consistent betrayal of the ideal of united Canada by a succession of French Canadian leaders.

AS A FINAL PARALLEL between Creighton and Groulx, before I turn to their essential differences, there is the fact that both of them have had the urge to overstep the frontiers between literary genres, and have attempted — Groulx the more successfully — to express their convictions through highly tendentious works of fiction. Groulx published his two novels under a nom-de-plume, Alonié de Lestres, which he may have adopted because of doubts about the reception that would be given to the first of these books, *L'appel de la race*. The book is in fact as naively racist as its title suggests. The hero, Jules de Lantagnac, comes to believe in "les affinités profondes de la race française et du catholicisme. C'est pourquoi, sans doute, on la dit la race de l'universel." His belief is reinforced by experience, since he marries an English convert to Catholicism, and goes to live in an Anglo-saxon environment where, despite his wife's acceptance of his own religion, he finds himself "effroyablement pénétré par les infiltrations protestantes." Eventually the family breaks up, and Jules, with two of his children, returns to his roots, while his wife and the other two remain with the English. Beyond the failure of Lantagnac's marriage there looms, in Groulx's mind, the larger failure of Confederation, of the marriage of the two principal Canadian races. And as a murky under-current there runs through the novel the sinister suggestion that antagonisms between nationalities and races are not only inevitable but necessary. Groulx's second novel, *Au cap Blomidon*, sustains its nationalist theme with much less passion and animosity than *L'appel de la race*; it is a rather simple story of an Acadian who works as hired man on a farm that once belonged to his family but is now owned by English-speakers; eventually he manages to buy back the land, and in this way symbolizes the repossession by the French Canadians of their material and spiritual heritage, the repossession for which Groulx all his lifetime longed.

Donald Creighton's novel, *Takeover* (1978), is a lighter work than either of Groulx's, written with deliberate melodrama and a touch of tongue-in-cheek gaiety. It is the story of the attempt by Americans to take over an old-established Canadian distillery. An aged lady, Aunt Cecilia, is the only member of the family to resist the sale, which all the others in various ways see as being to their

advantage; she is murdered by a desperate grand-niece. At the last moment Hugh Stuart, the main shareholder, feels he cannot carry on with the negotiations in view of the dead woman's wishes, and the novel ends on an ambiguous note. "But the past reached out and clutched him, and held him fast." One is left to wonder whether this message of mental and moral enslavement to dead tradition is all that Creighton's nationalism has in the end to offer. Or is this curious, gloomy, yet cynically amusing little fiction a measure of the extent to which Creighton now considers his old vision of Canada a lost cause, a measure of his sense of the myth ending — like so many myths of great adventures — in the triumph of negation?

Perhaps one sees the faults of both Creighton and Groulx most clearly in their novels because fiction is not their craft, and they are not so adept as other novelists in concealing the theme within the structure of the narrative. Too much is left for the characters to state, rather than for action to suggest and language to evoke. But essentially the qualities that spoil *L'appel de la race* and *Takeover* as credible fiction are the same as those that distinguish Creighton and Groulx, as historians, from other historians who are more closely dominated by factual rather than psychological actuality.

Both of them in fact begin from a vision that has a subjective reality outside history rather than an objective reality within history. In Creighton's case, the dominant vision is spatial even more than temporal; perhaps only Francis Parkman among North American historians conveyed so intensely the grandeur of the land, and there are times, particularly in *The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence*, when one feels one is reading a splendid and constantly changing map of a vast and sparsely peopled land rather than a narrative of events in time.

In the case of Groulx, the dominant subjective vision is that of the nation which is a manifestation of the church militant, uniting the dead and the living with its ranks as it advances on its divinely conferred mission. In an oration delivered at the very beginning of his career, when he was barely nineteen, Groulx declared to an audience of students:

Messieurs, vous êtes catholiques, vous êtes catholiques, vous êtes français: c'est-à-dire: lutteurs et chevaliers. Comme tous vos aînés dont la glorieuse phalange est aujourd'hui devant vous, un jour vous irez vous aligner comme soldats aux frontières de la société. Soldat, il faut l'être, il faut l'être à notre âge.

He never changed his view; Jeanne d'Arc was always one of his most beloved saints.

Inevitably, there are profound divergences between the visions of Creighton and Groulx, quite apart from the fact that Creighton's is secular (only the occasional orotundity of utterance betraying a youth of listening to Methodist ser-

mons) and Groulx's is unalterably religious. Perhaps the most important of these differences is that while Creighton's vision is expansive, Groulx's is defensive.

Creighton originally conceived Canada in grandiose terms, as an empire of the north; no longer a part of the British Empire, it seemed destined to follow its own imperial destiny which could be fulfilled within the confines of its own vast territory, without the need even to consider colonizing other lands. Having celebrated that destiny in *The Empire of the St. Lawrence*, in *Dominion of the North*, in the two volumes of his life of Macdonald, Creighton in the end saw it aborted by the surrender to continentalism, and hence to the rival American imperialism, on the part of successive Liberal governments, particularly under the malign direction of William Lyon Mackenzie King, who in Creighton's myth became the villain balancing the heroic Macdonald. What Macdonald built, King destroyed.

Groulx's vision, on the other hand, is anti-imperial, and not merely in the political sense. He did not envision the conquest — by commerce and settlement — of vast territories, as Creighton did. His Quebec remained enclosed within its traditional frontiers, and gained its significance and its sanctity from its role as one of those lesser nations which Groulx called "des peuples martyrs"; their virtue lay in a lack of the opportunity for material corruption, and they were destined to live as examples on a higher moral and spiritual level to the more prosperous and powerful nations, the great powers. Canada might conceivably — Laurier in an exalted moment had foreseen it — attain in the twentieth century to great power status; no degree of imagination could confer such a demoralizing possibility on Québec. And, since imperial expansion did not enter into the destiny of French Canada, it must conserve and defend its spiritual power, its moral testimony.

CONSIDERED IN TEMPORAL rather than in spatial terms, Groulx's vision is regressive, whereas Creighton's is progressive. Groulx always leads us to the desired future via the past. He originated a battle cry when he declared: "Nous avons à choisir ou de redevenir maîtres chez nous ou de nous résigner à jamais aux destinées d'un peuple de serfs," and the operative word in the sentence I have just quoted is surely "redevenir" — to "become again." What Groulx in fact sought was to recreate in Québec a Catholic community such as existed before the Conquest of 1760, but purged of its historic faults and prepared to apply a Christian discipline to material progress so that the evils of modern industrial societies would be mitigated on the shores of the St. Lawrence.

To define Creighton's vision as "progressive" may seem out-of-place in view of his strictures on the progressivism which he sees as one of the characteristics

shared by the English Whig historians and the Canadian Liberal historians, whom he despises to a man. As he defines it, in the Whig-Liberal view,

the course of historical change could obviously be nothing but the onward march of progress; and thus the task of the historian was not merely to explain and account for the present, but also to justify and vindicate it historically. Everything in the past which had the appearance of an origin, anticipation or promise of some valued feature of contemporary society was emphasized by the Whig historians; and everything that seemed incongruous in the eyes of the twentieth century or incompatible with its standards and values was treated briefly or criticized or explained away.

In the same Introduction to *Towards the Discovery of Canada* (1972) in which the above passage occurs, Creighton goes on to point out what he considers the basic flaw in the Canadian Liberal view of history — a view he describes as “almost a complete inversion of my own.”

In their eyes, Canada’s fundamental purpose was not survival in North America but emancipation from Europe. The winning of responsible government and what used to be called “Dominion status” — the achievement of compete autonomy inside the British Empire-Commonwealth — seemed to them by far the most important theme in Canadian history. They concentrated on constitutional history and the changing nature of the imperial connection; they neglected military history and relations with the United States. Gradually Canada’s long armed struggle for existence in a continent dominated by the United States receded into the dim, forgotten past; and Canadian-American “good neighbourhood” along “the four thousand miles of undefended frontier” was accepted as the natural condition of peaceful North America. Somehow Liberal historians managed to ignore or forget the fact that Great Britain had more often than not taken the initiative in the growth of responsible government and that, at the time of Confederation, she might have been readily persuaded to grant Canada independence. Instead they had converted the achievement of self-government into a long, acrimonious struggle in which every concession had been extorted by eager Canadians from an unwilling and obstinate Motherland.

Clearly what Creighton is rejecting is the idea that progress is inevitable, of which the corollary is the complacent belief that the present is always better than the past. Clearly, to Creighton, a present in which Canada’s economic and cultural life has largely been colonized by American interests and influences is worse than a past in which Canada’s links were strong with the European world and helped to sustain a distinctive British North American civilization. On the other hand, Creighton’s vision of Canada is itself distinctly progressive, in the sense that he sees a steady movement to encompass the land, to subject it first to commerce and then to settlement, and also a steady movement from the condition of a divided pattern of colonial provinces to a Dominion that could have been a Kingdom, might have been an empire, and can only survive as a strong nation state. The principal difference between Creighton’s progressivism and

that of the Whig-Liberal historians is that he does not see progress as inevitable. It is not there to be accepted; it must be willed and shaped by a dominating vision.

But the dominating vision extends to the past as well as the present and future and, as in all mythological history, tends to shape the past in terms of the desirable present. This explains what one can only describe as a major distortion in Creighton's view of Canadian history: that he treats Confederation as if its intent were not Confederation. More than any other Canadian historian, Creighton has fostered the fallacy that the Fathers of Confederation did not intend to create a genuine federalism, but a strong central government to which the provinces would be everlastingly subordinate. To strengthen his argument, he claimed that Confederation was not a compact between the colonies of British North America, but an arrangement imposed by the imperial government. All this flies in the face of actuality. Macdonald and some of his associates undoubtedly desired a strong central government, but not all the Maritimers did; for them the whole virtue of Confederation lay in the guarantee that local rights and interests would be protected and not subordinated, while the British North America Act was framed to suit the agreed wishes of the provinces and, far from being imposed by the imperial power, was passed as a formality by an indifferent Mother of Parliaments, hardly more than a bare quorum being present.

Creighton's strong adherence to governmental centralism has not only affected his view of Canadian political history since Confederation, but has also distorted his presentation of Canadian historical figures. Thus the two great wars become glorious occasions, with the waste of lives conveniently minimized, because they were times when the central government became strong and the provinces were truly subordinated. And in Creighton's gallery of historical portraits, quite apart from his celebrated inflation of Macdonald and equally celebrated deflation of Mackenzie King, we have such interesting contrasts as his portraits of R. B. Bennett and Oliver Mowat. Bennett, we are told, with a plethora of approving adjectives, "was a tall, robust man, vigorous, vital, dynamic, with an instinct for command, a monopolizing capacity for work, and an annihilating talent for political attack." Mowat is dismissed as "a short, round, physically negligible man, who had a lively sense of his own importance and a lusty urge towards domination." Note how the very same quality changes from "an instinct for command" in the case of the Tory centralist Bennett to "a lusty urge towards domination" in the case of the passionate defender of provincial rights, Mowat.

Like myth, prejudice makes readable history, and there is no doubt that both Creighton and Groulx have owed a great deal of their influence to the fact that their judgments are so often intemperate, their passions strong, their visions powerful enough to sweep us, at least temporarily, into the state of mind in which inconvenient facts are ignored and grand designs become acceptable even if they

do not necessarily follow the actual passage of events. This may explain why, even when actual history has diverged from the ideal patterns they made for it, even when they themselves have seen myth turning into tragedy (with the rise of a self-conscious but secular Québec in Groulx's case and the reality of American domination in Creighton's case), we cannot dismiss such historians as without influence.

They helped to shape the mental climate of their time, and in this sense their works acted as catalysts, even if the results were not what they had intended. It is impossible to detach events in Québec over the past twenty years from the sense of unique nationhood implanted by Groulx's treatment of history over a writing life of more than sixty years. And Creighton's influence on non-academic historians like Pierre Berton, on philosophic nationalists like George Grant, on poets like Lee and Purdy, on novelists like MacLennan and Atwood, has been as immense as it is incalculable in precise terms, providing them with a great imaginative structure of Canadian geo-history within which their individual visions of the land and its fate could take shape. The very faults that academic historians have found in the work of Creighton and Groulx have tended to make them more faithful servants of Clio, the muse of history as art and as myth.

THE QUESTION, IS IT?

Alfred G. Bailey

We the People
of the great North American
societal provenience
await with hope
the hazard of high endeavour
with a good deal of uncertainty,
not to say misgiving.
Especially when we recall
that James Abbott McNeill Whistler,
to whom so many were in the habit of deferring
in the declining decades of the last century,
said that art happens,
and how could we tell
whether it would happen to us?