

Review Article

Leaving Safe and Accustomed Ground: Ideas for Archivists

by TERRY COOK

The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada. RAMSAY COOK. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985. x, 291 p. illus. ISBN 0-8020-5670-9 \$32.50 cl. \$15.95 pa.

Any volume in Canadian history winning its year's Governor-General's Award for Non-Fiction naturally attracts attention — and steals part at least of a reviewer's thunder. There are good reasons for archivists to read this book, however, quite aside from its already earned fame and the reputation of its author as one of Canada's most prolific, subtle, and influential historians. In important ways, this study, whose themes are really larger than its title suggests, casts significant light on collections acquired, researched, and made available by Canadian archivists.

Although there are important and numerous exceptions, the vast bulk of Canadian archival holdings, public and private, fall into the post-1850 period. That same period witnessed an extraordinary transformation in the fabric of Canada: in transportation and communications; in industrialization and urbanization; in immigration and the composition of the nation's social texture; in the public profile of labour and women; in the country's international status; in its political composition; in its economic structures and educational institutions; and in the rate and nature of records created and maintained, especially by the nation's governmental and corporate bodies. Most archivists are, or recognize that they should be, familiar with at least the broad historical trends of this societal revolution. Few could argue successfully that archivists without a good knowledge of these major historical patterns would be able to identify competently the significance of potential acquisitions (beyond the obvious), or describe usefully the contents and context of archival holdings, or make them available in a sensitive way for users of archives.

But how does the archivist deal with the equally profound revolution in ideas since 1850, which is the focus of Professor Cook's volume? While it is not difficult for the archivist, equipped with proper research skills, to track down even an implicit or unclear reference in a document to a factual occurrence — a strike, a railway bond, a women's club, an immigrant society, a geographical location — and thus to describe and make available the document in question in an informed way, such a situation does not exist nearly as easily in the realm of ideas. Intellectuals (from ivory tower purists to journalistic popularizers) did not preface their comments on God, human nature, science and faith, poverty, or social reform with helpful headers that what followed was an example of the

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theosophy, spiritualism, cosmic consciousness, or Henry Georgeite socialism, as now uncovered in their Canadian contexts by Cook, or even of such mainline beliefs as positivism, utilitarianism, or philosophical idealism. Yet, lacking a knowledge of the history of such ideas, the archivist will be unable to recognize patterns of ideas or schools of thought, thus rendering acquisition haphazard, and description and service misleading for those archival records which document these ideas. While pinning and classifying the elusive butterfly of ideas is a far more difficult task than capturing its more mundane cousin of political, social, or economic fact, it strikes me that no archivist can cast the net aside and entirely ignore the challenge. In that Ramsay Cook provides an excellent, entertaining entrée into that intellectual history of Canada from 1880 to 1930, the intriguing challenge facing archivists of how to deal with ideas can begin with *The Regenerators*.

The history of ideas has a broader implication for archivists, however, one that touches the central principles of their discipline. Archivists are in the business of collecting and describing "information." Information is of course an "idea" — in its broadest sense as the representation of the intellect, even though the "idea" may range from pure philosophical constructs through articulated beliefs, doctrines, and principles, to vague attitudes, assumptions, and prejudices. There is a further link of the archivist and the study of (or sensitivity towards) ideas. No good archivist — or researcher — takes that information — or "idea" — as found in records at face value. It is essential that the context of its creation be fully researched and explained: who created or received the record, in what circumstances, and why. In answering such questions, the archivist behaves very much like the intellectual historian. Archivists ask what beliefs, attitudes, or perceptions motivated the creator (personal or corporate) of the record. That is what establishing provenance and *respect des fonds* at their crudest levels means.

Records do not exist as some kind of neutral mirror of reality. Archives are not, as some claim, the mirror of Canada past, but rather a warped glass whose quirks must be understood if the reflection received is to be interpreted as anything approaching reality. One must know the degree of distortion in order to compensate for the strange surface reflection. The short, fat person in the glass might in fact be tall and slender. This is obvious, even leaving aside the truism that the nature of the recording medium often significantly affects the message carried. The actual contents of the message also reflect the creator's perception of reality, whether on a printed page, through a photograph, or on a television screen. That perception will be a product of the creator's intellect and reason, or at a higher level of his or her soul and spirit. The interpretation of that perception, intellect, and spirit is the core of history and of the use of documents. It was for that reason that the greatest intellectual historian, Perry Miller, wrote that "I have been compelled to insist that the mind of man is the basic factor in human history."¹ Intellectual historians do not ask merely what people did, but, in a sense not relevant to the observed actions of cats or volcanoes, why they did it. The "why" drives one back to ideas, values, beliefs, assumptions, or the "mind" in Miller's phrase — in short, all the motivations of human actions and thus the grist of the intellectual historian's mill. In a similar way, the archivist in seeking to establish the context of a record will ask the same questions, for without an understanding of the intellectual filter through which the creator of the record perceived his or her world, the context of the resulting record must remain elusive indeed.

1 Perry Miller, *Errand in the Wilderness* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956), p. ix.

This is not an easy concept to grasp. Indeed, historians collectively have been slow to recognize it. The historicist approach of the von Rankean “scientific” tradition, which for many decades dominated modern professional history, generally dismissed the history of ideas as “a quagmire of subjectivity.” Writing in the 1950s before the recent flowering of intellectual history, one commentator reflected this by observing that with few exceptions historians “shared the general inertia induced by an inclination toward tangible particulars and a lack of training in theoretical analysis. By and large, they preferred to remain on safe and accustomed ground, studying the outward facts of social activities without investigating directly the movements of thought and feeling which lay behind them.”²

The same challenge (and indictment) faces archivists as they search for a professional mission and attempt to define a unique, integral discipline for themselves through graduate education, scholarly publishing, and sophisticated descriptive standards. It is necessary to transcend that “safe ground” of outward fact and surface reality: the name and place of the document’s creator, the name of its recipient, the date, and the indexing of proper names. The archivist must go further; he or she also has to research and describe the document’s context: why it was created and what hidden characteristics it possesses — like the fun house trick mirror — that left unrevealed will foil the unwary user. This is not the archivist as historian interpreting the contents of the record, but the archivist as scholar analyzing the record itself so others will not misinterpret its content. In this way, in methodology and perspective, the archivist is a kind of first cousin of the intellectual historian.³

Ramsay Cook’s *The Regenerators* has, therefore, a double significance for archivists. It is at once a good example of that perspective and methodology of intellectual history with which archivists should have a special affinity and a fine introduction to the intellectual history of a pivotal era during which many documents now in Canadian archives were created. Cook’s book is about more than the social criticism in late Victorian English Canada mentioned in the subtitle, although certainly it is that. Rather it concerns the whole mindset of the Western world for centuries, and certainly of Protestant Canada, which was fundamentally altered during this period. Despite the early critiques of seventeenth-century Deists and the Enlightenment *philosophes* — about which antecedents (and others) Cook is strangely silent — faith in the transcendent nature of God and the literal inspiration of the Scriptures remained the cornerstone of most people’s beliefs and value systems until 1850. From these unquestioned assumptions flowed ideas on almost every specific issue: human nature, science, politics, social reform, and so on.

The impact of Darwinian natural science and of historical and textual criticism of the Bible shattered this traditional paradigm. When combined with the ethical challenge posed by the social horrors of the new industrial cities, the result was a profound intellectual revolution. This was no mere alteration of traditional religious feeling or outlook or dogma — although it was that — but rather a transformation of society itself from the sacred to the secular. Cook defines secularization as “the shift from a religious explanation of man’s behaviour and relationships to a non-religious one.” His book seeks to explain how “the orthodox Christian preoccupation with man’s salvation was gradually replaced

2 John Higham, “The Rise of American Intellectual History,” *American Historical Review* 56 (April 1951), pp. 457, 462.

3 For a fuller discussion of intellectual history and its significance for archives, see Terry Cook, “Nailing Jelly to a Wall: Possibilities in Intellectual History,” *Archivaria* 11 (Winter 1980-81), pp. 205-18.

by a concern with social salvation; the traditional Christian emphasis on man's relationship with God shifted to a focus on man's relationship with man. This union of the sacred and secular was followed ... by the substitution of theology, the science of religion, with sociology, the science of society. In theological terms the development ... [saw] the emergence of a modernist theology which insisted that Christianity was not separate from modern culture but rather should be adapted to it. That theology was founded upon a denial of God's transcendence and an insistence upon his immanence in the world. It followed that a society in which God was immanent was one that could eventually become the kingdom of God on earth." (pp. 4-5)

The central irony of this process, of course, is that the men and women so involved, who almost to a person sought to enhance the power of religion by making it more relevant through these social gospel formulations, ultimately made Christianity extraneous to twentieth-century society. "By urging Christians to emphasize social utility and to downplay or ignore doctrine [which given Darwin and the German critics could not survive unscathed anyway]," Cook posits that "these advocates of the social gospel were in fact making the church irrelevant in a world where other institutions were better equipped to perform the socially useful roles once fulfilled by the church." (p. 6) With a new intellectual paradigm, new secular perspectives on all issues, and new secular institutions also came a new kind of leader: the secular professional replaced the religious shepherd as society's guide. Secularization is the fundamental difference between twentieth-century Canada and all preceding centuries. In introducing readers to that theme, as well as tracing so many aspects of the social criticism which grew out of it, Cook has made a signal contribution to Canadian historiography.

Cook writes with fluent clarity, using telling anecdotes and witty asides to make a difficult subject attractive and comprehensible. His cast of assembled characters, well-known and otherwise, defend and amend the old paradigm: Goldwin Smith, grumpy continentalist of the Grange, revealed as an anxious sceptic longing for the old sureties; Allen Pringle, the free-thinking bee-keeper from Napanee, given to hosting meetings to shake the establishment's complacency; Richard Maurice Bucke, the superintendent of the London Insane Asylum known for his gynecological operations on women, enamoured with Walt Whitman's mysticism and developing the strange notion of cosmic consciousness; Flora MacDonald Denison, the women's rights activist, finding solace for a lost sister in spiritualism; or J.W. Bengough, the cartoonist and satirist of *Grip*, promoting the influential doctrines of Henry George to a receptive Canadian audience. These and a host of others populate Cook's pages, giving life and flesh to the values they espoused as agents, consciously or not, of the secularization of Canada. Cook appropriately ends with Mackenzie King whose own ideas (and those of his mid-twentieth-century world) were formed by the collective impact of the characters and ideas of the preceding chapters. Indeed, his portrait of King is uncommonly sensitive, as it makes clear (rather than ridicules) the social writings and reformist ideas of that enigmatic figure. It also brings the concerns discussed remarkably close to the intellectual antecedents of most readers, thus adding to the appeal of the volume.

Good as this book is, its sum exceeds its sometimes strange parts. Not content to trace out his grand themes, Cook seems in his middle chapters on spiritualism, theosophy, cosmic consciousness, and certain manifestations of Georgeite socialism to be intent on glorifying the obscure. It is one thing to demonstrate that the spiritual and intellectual transformation taking place reached into unlikely corners, thus showing the enormous

impact of that transformation in every aspect of Canadian life. It is another to do so at the expense of ignoring significant manifestations of and causes for that transformation. Cook's own well-known Actonian liberalism and anti-nationalism leads him astray; indeed, in his introduction, he boasts that, "best of all," most of his characters rarely alluded "to the cultivation of a national sentiment." (p. 6) It is possible to suggest that he studied the wrong characters, at least in part. There was at that time a very close link between the cultivation of a national and imperial sentiment and the hoped-for social regeneration of society. Many Canadians followed the same path from transcendence to immanence as did Cook's characters, but very much within the context of national sentiment.⁴ Or, again, rural and farm reformers, whether focusing on the Canadian West or in central Canada through the Ontario Agricultural College, also sought a social regeneration of society within the context of an agricultural Eden (immanence again) uplifting the nation and Empire.⁵ Some of the anxieties felt by imperial and rural reformers perhaps put in better perspective the impact of Darwinism and textual criticism, which Cook overstresses; there were significant other forces, in short, leading to the results achieved by Cook's characters. Cook also has an anti-institutional bias: he seems to stress the colourful, free-thinking mavericks at the expense of incumbents of the churches and universities who went through the same spiritual crisis and, I venture to add, with considerably more sophistication of analysis than J.W. Bengough or T. Phillips Thompson.⁶ By ignoring or downplaying all such other Canadians, Cook loses the opportunity to sketch the fuller canvas of the movement of social criticism in this period.

It may be said, too, that the narrative and mini-biographical approach of the volume, which has its own strong appeal, sacrifices a sounder analysis of some of the ideas at issue. For example, Cook never explains in one place what exactly the central points of Biblical criticism were and thus why it had such a devastating impact. Rather, the concept comes out in five or six places, piece-by-piece over fifty pages, as various characters in turn dealt with aspects of the issue. Its overall impact is thus relatively lost. Similarly, the concept of philosophical idealism (and its popular manifestations) is never defined at length, but rather passed over. Given its central importance to late nineteenth-century social reform, Cook pays too little attention to idealism both as an intellectual creed and a motivating force.⁷ And Cook's secularization model itself may need some refinement. How typical of

4 See, for example, Carl Berger, *The Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism, 1867-1914* (Toronto, 1970); and S.E.D. Shortt, *The Search for an Ideal: Six Canadian Intellectuals and Their Convictions in an Age of Transition, 1890-1930* (Toronto, 1976). The issue is addressed directly in Terry Cook, "George R. Parkin and the Concept of Britannic Idealism," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 10 (August 1975), pp. 22-27.

5 Doug Owram and Tom Nesmith have studied this in depth. For references to and a fuller description of their work, see Cook, "Nailing Jelly to a Wall," p. 213-17.

6 See A.B. McKillop, *A Disciplined Intelligence: Critical Inquiry and Canadian Thought in the Victorian Era* (Montreal, 1979), *passim*.

7 In addition to the above cited works of McKillop, Shortt, and Cook, see for example Melvin Richter, *The Politics of Conscience* (London, 1964). Also suggestive are A.J.M. Milne, *The Social Philosophy of English Idealism* (London, 1962); W.S. Fowler, "The Influence of Idealism Upon State Provision of Education," *Victorian Studies* 4 (June 1961), pp. 343-44; and Peter Weiler, "The New Liberalism of L.T. Hobhouse," *Victorian Studies* 16 (December 1972), pp. 141-61. As these sources tend to suggest, Cook perhaps relied too much on American secondary works and thus stressed in his book the American sources of many of the ideas he articulates. The very strong English and Scottish intellectual connections in Canadian life are thus less prominent in his book than they should have been, especially if he consciously avoided those with "national sentiment" uppermost in their minds, which then meant for many Canadians a close connection to the ideas and values of the imperial centre.

individual Canadians and society at large was the central example of J.S. Woodsworth, who personally went from Methodist minister to secular socialist? At the end of this period, is Cook telling us that transcendence was dead, that no significant number of “mainline” Canadians in established churches and theological colleges — leaving aside fundamentalist cults and sects — believed any longer in pursuing personal salvation and the God-person relationship, even if now in conjunction with social reform and liberal theology? That certainly is the implication of his thesis, and if so it is overstated, a not unusual fault of a pioneering work attempting to stroke in the broad outlines of a large issue.

These caveats do not detract significantly, however, from Ramsay Cook’s accomplishment. *The Regenerators* is a stimulating book on a major theme. It deserves the honours which it has received and the attention of Canadian archivists.