

Reflections on Donald Creighton and the Appeal of Biography

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THIS MUCH WE KNOW. Donald Grant Creighton was born at home, at 262 Concord Avenue, in the west end of Toronto, on 15 July 1902. His mother was Laura Harvie Creighton; his father was the Reverend William Black Creighton, editor of the *Christian Guardian* and, after church unification in 1925, the *New Outlook*. Laura and William Creighton lived the values of family, hard work, education and service. In 1920 Donald Creighton entered Victoria College, the Methodist college affiliated with the University of Toronto. Regarded by his professors as an unusually gifted student, he was awarded the 1925 Edward Kylie Scholarship that took him to Balliol for two years, but not before he fell in love for the first – and only – time in his life. One year later, in 1926, he and Luella Bruce were married in London, England. In 1927 he returned to the University of Toronto as a lecturer in the Department of History. Ten years later, he published his first book, *The Empire of the St. Lawrence*, and established his reputation as his generation's leading historian. Frank Underhill took him aside to tell him that it "was the best book of Canadian history ever written."¹ Another colleague told him, "You're the white hope of a new and better day in [Canadian historical writing]."² His two-volume biography of Sir John A. Macdonald, published in 1952 and 1955, confirmed that reputation. The great British historian, Max Beloff, referred to Creighton as "one of the half-dozen best historians now writing anywhere in the English-speaking world."³ Holding up *John A. Macdonald: The*

Young Politician, Isaiah Berlin once announced to his students, “On the strength of this one volume I can say that I have been communing this past weekend with the greatest historical writer of our time.”⁴ The honours poured in. He was awarded the Tyrrell Gold Medal, two Governor General’s Awards for Non-Fiction, and the Molson Prize; in addition, he received honorary degrees from universities across the country, literally from Newfoundland to British Columbia.

Meanwhile, politicians sought his expertise in constitutional history. In 1938 he wrote a study on British North America at Confederation for the Royal Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations. In 1960 he achieved international recognition when he served as a Commonwealth member of the Advisory Commission on the Review of the Constitution of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, better known as the Monckton Commission. And from 1965 to 1970 he sat on the Ontario Advisory Committee on Confederation, which advised Premier John Robarts on constitutional matters.

When Creighton retired from the University of Toronto in 1971, he continued to supervise doctoral students, to write, and to lecture. He and Luella enjoyed their “Old Ontario” house,⁵ magnificent garden, and orange tabby cat, in Brooklin, a small village just east of Toronto. They loved to entertain and took enormous pleasure in welcoming friends, colleagues, students, and journalists. Then came the cancer, first in 1976 and again in 1979. Four operations, two rounds of chemotherapy, and one colostomy later, Creighton died on 19 December 1979. “Donald is dead,” Luella recorded in her diary. “In the early hours of Wednesday morning at about 3 o’clock he was breathing quietly – at about 5:30 – just now – I went in and he is cold.”⁶

I often tell people that I live with my wife, our two daughters, and a ghost. To borrow Stephen Clarkson and Christina McCall’s phrase from their biography of Pierre Trudeau, Donald Creighton haunts me. This, I think, is the biographer’s fate: to be haunted, to find himself thinking about his subject at

all times and in all places. I think about Creighton while pouring apple juice, while tidying the playroom, and while walking my daughters to the school bus. (He loved his children, but fatherhood was defined along different lines in mid-twentieth-century Canada.) I think about him while preparing undergraduate lectures. (He advised one of his many young graduate students to work hard at lecture preparation, to invest the time in writing out a lecture in sentences and paragraphs in order to get the structure and the rhythm right.⁷) And I think about him, late at night, when I can't sleep. (During his protracted battle with cancer, I like to think that, as a man of faith, he found comfort in Psalm 23:4, a Psalm that could "very much affect" him,⁸ even "dissolve" him.⁹ "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff comfort me.") None of this is surprising. Day and night, night and day, biographers think about, suffer for, endure, and, yes, enjoy their subjects. A.S. Byatt was not wrong to liken the writing of biography to an obsession – an all-consuming, overwhelming, unstoppable, irrational obsession – in her novel, *Possession*. Although I am not likely to disinter the remains of Donald Creighton à la Byatt's protagonists, I am no less obsessed.

On numerous occasions, I have been asked why: why Donald Creighton? The question is asked politely, but with more than a hint of incredulity. The name itself – Donald Grant Creighton – is a lightning rod. It attracts charged and, more often than not, negative opinions. Xenophobic, francophobic, reactionary, and embittered: this is the Donald Creighton who is most often recalled. C.P. Stacey remembered a difficult man: "[Creighton] frequently insulted me; but, then, I think, he insulted practically everybody."¹⁰ Ken McNaught painted an unflattering portrait of his former colleague: he was anti-Semitic, anti-American, paranoid, jealous, difficult to please, mean spirited, and frugal to the point of being cheap.¹¹ Stephen Clarkson and Christina McCall dismissed Creighton as a "notorious francophobic curmudgeon."¹² Veronica Strong-Boag argued that, as a historian, Creigh-

ton dismissed points of view that competed with his own and that he held a blinkered vision of the past.¹³ Desmond Morton said of Creighton that “he died a bitter old man.”¹⁴ According to Ray Conlogue, the Montreal arts reporter for the *Globe and Mail*, *The Empire of the St. Lawrence* was “avidly read by the schoolchildren who now run English Canada,” and, as a result, lies at the root of English Canada’s inability to imagine the conquest as Quebec’s founding trauma, and its refusal to give up its role as conqueror.¹⁵ Finally, Creighton’s temper and temperament were legendary. Adjectives like “acidic,” “blistering,” “cadaverous,” “difficult,” “explosive,” “frosty,” “gloomy,” “volatile” and “vinegary” recur in the many interviews I have conducted with his former colleagues and graduate students. His son, Philip Creighton, remarked, “With my father, you never knew what would set him off. French Canadians. Income taxes. Government interference. The Americans.”¹⁶ And he was notoriously thin-skinned. Criticism, especially when it came from men he considered his intellectual inferiors, enraged him. When the “pestiferous”¹⁷ Arthur Lower wrote a negative review of one of his books, Creighton exploded: “That pot-bellied son of a bitch! That awful man! He’s never written a decent book in his life!”¹⁸

To be sure, Creighton had faults. He did distrust bilingualism. Unable to imagine women as academics, he did not support female graduate students in the way he supported male graduate students. His scholarship was, at times, unquestionably partisan. His anti-Semitism was distasteful. Thin-skinned, quick-tempered and jealous, he could be, as one colleague put it, “hell to get along with.”¹⁹ This is the Donald Creighton we remember. By the 1960s, English Canada’s most accomplished historian had become a caricature: one-dimensional, uncomplicated and unlikeable; temperamental, francophobic and intolerant.

Creighton knew that he had become a pariah. His outspoken views on French Canadian nationalism, bilingualism and biculturalism in the 1960s and 1970s had left him isolated and feeling very much misunderstood. In a letter to his long-time

friend and confidant, Eugene Forsey, Creighton wondered aloud about his legacy. “I begin to feel that I will be remembered, if I am remembered at all, as a pessimist, a bigot, and a violent Tory partisan.”²⁰ Two years later, Creighton instructed Forsey to destroy his half of their lengthy correspondence. Ungrateful Canadians did not deserve his papers. He then added another – and “important” – point.

I have no desire to become the subject of a doctoral thesis – or what is more likely a Master's thesis in some Canadian university. And that, of course, is exactly the kind of memorial I am most likely to get. Nobody would want to write a proper biography of me.²¹

It would be worse than he could have imagined. About ten years ago I contemplated writing his biography for my dissertation but was advised not to go near him. As the third rail of Canadian intellectual and political life, he would kill any chance I might have of a university career: touch him and you're dead. The profession, I was told, had no interest in a biography of Donald Creighton. Taking this advice, I moved on to another topic. Creighton appeared in my dissertation on the professionalization of history in English Canada, but he was not its subject.²²

Why am I now writing – in Creighton's words – a “proper biography” of him? Because he was too important a figure in the intellectual, cultural and political history of this country to ignore. He was a far more complicated and complex person than the one found in the phrase “notorious francophobic curmudgeon.” And it is a paranoid fantasy to assert – without a shred of evidence – that *The Empire of the St. Lawrence* was avidly read by the schoolchildren who now run English Canada and who, as a result, are unable to imagine themselves as anything other than conquerors. The fact is, *The Empire of the St. Lawrence* and the two-volume biography of Sir John A. Macdonald remain in print because they are outstanding contributions to

English-Canadian historical writing and to English-Canadian self-understanding. To quote Ramsay Cook, “You don’t have to like the guy. But he was an extraordinarily important figure.”²³

But I do like the guy. He was not only the “tall, thin, bony, Ichabod-Cranish” stick of a man that at least one colleague remembers.²⁴ He was kind, generous, hospitable and attentive. He laboured tirelessly, endlessly even, on behalf of his department, his students, his profession, and his country. He suffered, both physically and emotionally, for his art. His interests were wide-ranging and eclectic. His great passions were literature, art, and opera. He enjoyed good company and robust conversation. He liked a good drink. He worshipped his wife and supported her own writing career; he was proud of his son and his accomplishments; his daughter was “the apple of his eye.”²⁵ He was an emotional man, a sensitive man, who felt things deeply. And he was a complicated man. His tendency to idealize both the past and the present produced disappointment and sadness in his writing and in his personal life. Change made him uneasy and anxious and angry. When the country redefined itself along bilingual and multicultural lines, he got angry, but that anger was part of a larger grief. “He grieved so for Canada,” his wife wrote after his death.²⁶ When his daughter became a woman and made her own choices, he got angry, but again that anger was part of a grief for a little girl he perceived to be lost to him, even dead in a way. To remember her as a child could make him feel “inexpressibly sad.” It was like reading the casualty lists in old newspapers, he said.²⁷

My working title for this project is “Donald Creighton: A Life in History.” After all, his was “a life in history” in both senses of the phrase. History was his passion, his calling, his duty, his profession, and his art. And, as with all historians, his work cannot be fully understood without understanding its historical context. However, unlike most historians, Creighton lived and worked in a historical context that can be better understood through an understanding of his life and work. In this sense, a

biography of Donald Creighton is also a biography of twentieth-century Canada from the 1920s to the 1970s. This is a bold assertion. After all, Carlyle's aphorism, "history is the biography of great men," is simply not true. Even the greatest of men are not that great. For my part, I am making a much more modest claim: Creighton's life cuts across some of the largest themes in twentieth-century Canada. These include the decline of Canada's political, economic, and psychic connection to Great Britain and the simultaneous integration of Canada and the United States; the rise of the modern university; the professionalization of intellectual life; the challenge of Quebec separatism in the 1960s and 1970s; and the re-definition of the country along bilingual, multi-cultural lines. Creighton's life – his career, his scholarship, his public contributions – offers a window through which to view twentieth-century Canada.

It is not a perfect window: it offers neither a panoramic nor unobstructed view. As a methodology, biography has obvious limitations. The most obvious is biography's focus on a single individual, almost always an important one, someone who, by virtue of their political, economic, intellectual, or military importance, left behind the archival material needed to reconstruct a life. This reconstruction can privilege the perspective of that individual and thus skew or simplify the complexity of the past. For all its strengths, this was the weakness of Creighton's biography of Macdonald. It centred Canada's first prime minister and overstated his contribution to nineteenth-century Canadian political life. In her CBC radio review of *John A. Macdonald: The Young Politician*, Hilda Neatby conceded that it is "easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a biographer not to be partisan." But, she added, Creighton's "dislike and contempt" for Macdonald's adversaries – George Brown in particular – "threaten to compromise the principles of scholarship."²⁸ (For his part, Creighton was not impressed. He found Neatby's review "an indifferent performance, at once dull and annoying.")²⁹ But biography's limitation is also its strength. Its focus on a single

individual allows us to experience historical change over time at ground level, to walk a historical mile in someone else's shoes.

Its focus on a single individual is also the source of biography's enormous appeal and popularity, and it is this question that I now want to take up: how are we to explain biography's appeal and popularity? Biographies regularly appear on the best-sellers list; walk into any bookstore, and you will find a biography section; *Biography* on A&E and its spin-off, *Biography Magazine*, remain popular; the CBC's *Life and Times* is entering its tenth season, while *The Greatest Canadian* generated a national conversation. But there is more to the appeal and popularity of biography than the brilliant style of a particular biographer or the marketing genius of Heather Reisman or the high production values at A&E. Jean Barman argues that it is modern culture's obsession with celebrity and personality – with the individual – that gives biography its popularity and its utility to the teaching of history, to connecting young people to the past.³⁰ Peter Waite believes that biography attracts a wide audience because it is at the core of history, not its periphery. It is in “the very middle of it,” because it reveals “men and women in process of being,” when the process of being is what it means to be human.³¹

Taking my cue from Barman's reference to modern culture and from Waite's reference to Martin Heidegger's idea about life as a process of being, I want to argue that modern culture is antithetical to any meaningful, authentic process of being, *and* I want to argue that this contradiction is the source of biography's appeal and popularity.

Modern culture is a culture of speed. It is a commitment to the present over the past, innovation over tradition, acceleration over reflection, and movement over rest. Harold Innis understood this aspect of modern culture. And he worried about it. In particular, he worried about the ability of new means of communication to overcome time. The effect, he feared, was what he called “the disappearance of an interest in time” and the con-

comitant obsession with the here and now, the useful, and the practical. "Obsession with present-mindedness," he wrote, "precludes speculation in terms of duration and time."³² Speculation in terms of duration and time, Innis believed, was crucial to the survival of civilization.

Writing some fifty years after Innis, the American writer Sven Birkerts effectively – if not deliberately – picks up where Innis left off. Birkerts argues that our culture of speed has "destroyed" duration. "Duration," Birkerts writes, "is deep time, time experienced without awareness of time passing." But duration is not possible in a world of simultaneities, in a world in which we do "five things at once or pay the price." Simply put, either we multi-task or we fall behind. Faced with that choice, we choose to multi-task. But as Birkerts reminds us, that choice "distances the self from the primary things that give meaning and purpose to life," where meaning and purpose are understood as a contemplation of depth, of the Judeo-Christian premise of unfathomable mystery.³³ Shallow and transient, modern culture lacks authenticity; it lacks weight. What Peter Waite calls the "process of being," becomes what Milan Kundera calls "the unbearable lightness of being." A world that is unable and unwilling to slow down dissolves our sense of self. All that is solid, including the self, melts into air.

It is this fact, life's unbearable lightness and our dissolving selves, that explains biography's popularity. Lacking a sense of who we are, of where we have come from and where we are going, we turn to biography as compensation. Our "days pass behind desks, behind counters, behind tinted glass, in front of terminals, waiting in lines, sitting in cars. In this kind of environment," Birkerts argues, "it is harder and harder for any of us to hold a vivid and compelling idea of 'my life.'" And that is why we turn to biography. "Biographical narration itself is premised upon coherence and meaning."³⁴ It is premised on the assumption that a self existed and that it can be known. We read biographies because they promise us a beginning, a middle, and an end; they

present us with a life imbued with purpose and meaning and weight; in effect, they give us what we lack in our own lives – a sense of destiny, a feeling of coherence, the promise of a self.³⁵

It was a similar anxiety that drew Creighton to biography as a mode of historical narration. Biography allowed him to put the individual back into history, to say that the individual matters. Communism, fascism and World War II created a sense of powerlessness in individuals confronting mass movements. It was the historian's task, Creighton believed, to offer a counterweight, to, in effect, empower the individual in history. "History," he wrote in 1945, "is not made by inanimate forces and human automatons; it is made by living men and women, impelled by an endless variety of ideas and emotions, which can be best understood by that insight into character, that imaginative understanding of people, which is one of the great attributes of literary art."³⁶ From here it was a short step to his magisterial two-volume biography of Sir John A. Macdonald.

Creighton was right. We are not automatons sitting in front of computers clicking our mouses in response to electronic stimuli. We are human beings: imperfect, yes; flawed, absolutely; broken, in some cases; but also wonderful and complicated and beautiful and contradictory and endlessly fascinating. Forcing us to slow down and asking us to consider a life from beginning to end, biography reminds us that we are individuals endowed with the capacity to make choices and that, as much as modern culture may tell us otherwise, we are not so many Pavlovian dogs.

Notes

- 1 Luella Creighton, Diary entry for 10 November 1938. Original in the possession of Cynthia Flood.
- 2 Bartlet Brebner to Donald Creighton, 6 September 1940, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Donald Creighton fonds, MG 31 D 77 volume 1, file General Correspondence 1940.
- 3 Max Beloff, Review of *John A. Macdonald: The Young Politician*, by Donald Creighton, *The Spectator*, 6 March 1953.
- 4 Author's interview with Tom Symons, 26 January 2004.
- 5 Donald Creighton, Diary entry for 22 March 1962, LAC, Donald Creighton fonds, MG 31, D 77, volume 65, file 4.
- 6 Luella Creighton, Diary entry for 19 December 1979, University of Waterloo, Doris Lewis Rare Book Room, Luella Creighton fonds, GA 99, Series 3, Box 3, File 23.
- 7 Author's interview with John Moir, 4 July 2003.
- 8 Donald Creighton, Diary entry for 8 December 1969, LAC, Donald Creighton fonds, MG 31, D 77, volume 65, file 7.
- 9 Luella Creighton, Diary entry for 8 December 1969, University of Waterloo, Doris Lewis Rare Book Room, Luella Creighton fonds, GA 99, Series 3, Box 2, File 15.
- 10 C.P. Stacey, *A Date With History* (Ottawa: Deneau, 1983), 228.
- 11 See Kenneth McNaught, *Conscience and History: A Memoir* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).
- 12 Stephen Clarkson and Christina McCall, *Trudeau and Our Times*, volume 1, *The Magnificent Obsession* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1990), 71.
- 13 Veronica Strong-Boag, "Contested Space: The Politics of Canadian Memory," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 5 (1994), 7-8.
- 14 Quoted in Michael Valpy, "Is the National Dream Over?" *Globe and Mail*, 11 March 2006.
- 15 Ray Conlogue, *Impossible Nation: The Longing for Homeland in Canada and Quebec* (Stratford: Mercury Press, 1996), 39; Ray Conlogue, "A Dialogue of the Deaf between the Conqueror and the Conquered," *Globe and Mail*, 21 January 1995.
- 16 Author's interview with Philip Creighton, 30 September 2004.
- 17 McNaught, *Conscience and History*, 145.
- 18 Author's interview with Ramsay Cook, 3 December 2004.
- 19 Gerald Graham to Bartlet Brebner, 12 May 1952, box 5, file Innis, John Bartlet Brebner Collection, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.
- 20 Donald Creighton to Eugene Forsey, 2 May 1970, LAC, MG 31 D 77, Donald Creighton fonds, volume 26, file Correspondence with Eugene Forsey 1965-1975.
- 21 Donald Creighton to Eugene Forsey, 12 November 1972, LAC, MG 31 D 77, Donald Creighton fonds, volume 26, file Correspondence with Eugene Forsey 1965-1975.

- 22 See Donald Wright, *The Professionalization of History in English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).
- 23 Author's interview with Ramsay Cook, 3 December 2004.
- 24 Author's interview with Ted McWhinney, 19 October 2004.
- 25 Author's interview with John Cairns, 2 December 2004.
- 26 Luella Creighton to Robert Finch, 2 February 1980, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, MS Coll. 324, Robert Finch fonds, box 17, file 10.
- 27 Robert Finch, Diary entry for 7 September 1970, *Ibid*, box 8, 1970 notebook.
- 28 Hilda Neatby, CBC Radio, 23 November 1952. Transcript in Saskatchewan Archives Board, Saskatoon, Hilda Neatby fonds, A139, VIII. 202(5).
- 29 Donald Creighton, Diary entry for 23 November 1952, LAC, Donald Creighton fonds, MG 31, D 77, volume 65, file 1.
- 30 See Jean Barman, "Biographies in the Teaching of History," *Canadian Issues/ Thèmes canadiens* (October 2003), 4-6.
- 31 Peter Waite, "Biography and History: Reflections of a Biographer-Historian," *Canadian Issues/ Thèmes canadiens* (October 2003), 11.
- 32 Harold Innis, "A Plea for Time," 1950. Reprinted in Daniel Drache, ed., *Staples, Markets and Cultural Change: Selected Essays by Harold A. Innis* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's, 1995), 376.
- 33 Sven Birkerts, "The Electronic Hive: Two Views, 1. Refuse It," *Harper's Magazine*, May 1994, 18-20.
- 34 Sven Birkerts, "Biography and the Dissolving Self," in *Readings*, ed. Sven Birkerts (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1999), 94.
- 35 Of course, it is also true that biographical narration – like any narration – is constructed. It is invented. It is artificial. In this sense, it is thoroughly modern. And there's the rub. To escape from one aspect of modernity (its denial of depth and duration and coherence), we enter another aspect of modernity (its artifice as built into the biography). Irony, it goes without saying, lies at the heart of the modern condition.
- 36 Donald Creighton, "The Writing of Canadian History," Founders' Day Address, University of New Brunswick, 19 February 1945), 16. Copy in University of New Brunswick Archives and Special Collections.

[Back to TOC](#)