

**“What Shadows We Are, and What Shadows We Pursue”
A Study of Edmund Burke’s Influence on Canadian Political Culture**

by

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ABSTRACT

This historiographical study explores the influence of Edmund Burke on Canadian political culture. In the mid-twentieth century, conservative nationalist English-Canadian historians popularized the notion that Burkean thought had a formative influence on political traditions and government institutions in Canada. That claim has persisted to the present day despite its veracity having never been demonstrated by historical evidence. To address that oversight, this dissertation tests for the influence of Burke in a person and time that were critical to the formation of Canadian political culture, Sir John A. Macdonald and the Confederation project. Using an intellectual history methodology, it finds that Macdonald's letters and speeches, the Confederation debates, and the BNA Act do not offer definitive proof of the Burkean claim. Macdonald and Confederation are then analysed through a political economy lens to demonstrate that the explanatory power of the Burkean claim is comparatively weak. The dissertation then focuses on the mid-twentieth century figures who made the claim, locating its origins in their responses to political and intellectual issues of their times.

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INTRODUCTION

English Canadian nationalists, always concerned with justifying Canada's existence as a separate polity in North America, have long laid claim to a national identity distinct from that of the United States. Prior to the 1960s, it was common to argue that Canada was more conservative than its southern neighbour. This alleged characteristic, a legacy of Canada's British heritage, became known as the "Tory Touch."

By the mid-twentieth century, a weakened Britain was dismantling its Empire, and the Tory Touch appeared to have lost its lustre, even its relevance, to younger and liberal-minded Canadians. Alarmed, some of English-Canada's leading historians, largely conservative nationalists, attempted to reinvigorate the Tory Touch thesis in a new form. They suggested that fundamental and enduring principles that shaped Canadian political culture were attributable to the influence of Edmund Burke (1727-1797), the famous eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish statesman and political philosopher. Since then this claim has been picked up by other scholars and perpetuated as a shorthand signifier of Canada's distinctiveness.

The starting point for this dissertation is that this claim has never been given serious critical scrutiny. That Edmund Burke was and remains among the most important contributors to the British political tradition, as well as to western political philosophy more generally, is not in dispute. There is no question his ideas were important to Canadian politicians in the nineteenth century, but that they were fundamental is another question entirely. The progenitors of the Burkean claim offered little evidence in support of it. Their disciples have relied on the cultural authority of the claim's progenitors rather than original independent research. While the claim seems plausible, its veracity has not yet been demonstrated by meaningful proof based in historical evidence.

This study attends to that task. It proposes that if Burkean political ideas were indeed foundational to Canadian political culture, then his prescriptive wisdom should be apparent in the political discourse of the 1860s through which Confederation gave rise to a national body politic. Confederation generated contemporary debate and commentary too voluminous for a project of this size to assess comprehensively, so it was necessary to delimit the object of inquiry in a way that would make it manageable in scope yet still meaningful in its results. Consequently, the focus was narrowed to John A. Macdonald, the leading Father of Confederation. He was the chief architect of Confederation and wrote much of the BNA Act himself. If Burke was the spiritual godfather of Confederation, then surely his influence must be evident in Macdonald's labours on that project. Indeed, certain exponents of the Burkean claim specifically highlighted its influence on Macdonald.

This study finds that evidence of a formative Burkean influence on Sir John A. Macdonald – and, by extension, Confederation and Canadian political culture – is at best inconclusive. No compelling case substantiating the Burkean claim emerges out of this research. If Canada is a Burkean polity, there is little evidence of it in Macdonald's Confederation project.

The explanatory power of the claim is then further tested by comparing these results to those yielded by interpreting Macdonald's politics through a political economy lens. In the historiography of Confederation, the proposition that it was an economic project is common. A review of the evidence concludes that this is, relatively speaking, a much stronger interpretation than the Burkean claim.

How then do we account for the origins of the Burkean claim? Conservative English-Canadian nationalist historians of the mid-twentieth century were concerned about modernization, continentalism, and the changing character of Canadian liberal democracy. They

sought to distinguish Canada's political culture from that of the United States. They believed the former was weighted towards the British conservative virtues of tradition, loyalty, paternalism, and community, and therefore differed markedly from the latter, in which the untrammelled values of individualism and unmoderated liberty prevailed. Their anxieties explain the origins of the Burkean claim better than any discernable influence Burke had upon the leading Father of Confederation.

Why did they choose Burke as an identity marker? Burke had prestige. He had become a symbol of all that was good and wise in the British political tradition. This made him a potent rhetorical weapon to deploy in debates over Canada's identity and destiny in the postwar world. The invocation of Burke made sense in terms of their polemical imperatives. His name ennobled their cause and provided a symbolic shorthand by which to reify a nebulous yet significant distinction between Canada and the United States.

This was a case in which contemporary political exigencies ran roughshod over history. These Burkanadians, as I will call them for the sake of ready reference, ignored the complexity of Burke's thought and how particular historical contexts had influenced it. They also violently simplified the history of political philosophies that had shaped Canada. To claim a formative Burkean inheritance for Canada was to imply a simpler and purer intellectual derivation for the country's political culture than the historical record can support. While the Burkean claim plausibly endows the notion of a "Tory Touch" with intellectual sophistication and substance, upon investigation it proves chimerical. Canada is Burkean only insofar as Burke's name serves as an effective label for a general and vague distinction between the political traditions of Canada and the U.S.

Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins coined the term “meme” to convey the idea that cultural idioms can be perpetuated in human societies in a manner analogous to the intergenerational transfer of genetic material in the natural world. According to Dawkins, a meme may take many forms, including “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases...or of building arches.” Like a successful gene it must have longevity, fecundity, and be copied accurately.¹ “Meme” has taken on added importance in the age of the internet and social media. In the last twenty years the concept has proliferated among academic disciplines and is regularly used in analyses of cultural forms, such as literature.² Although I will variously use terms such as “meme,” “claim,” “assertion,” and “notion” in this dissertation, “meme” nicely conveys the intellectual history concept of an idea enduring over time. It is most useful in relation to, first, the Burkanadians’ contention that the work of an eighteenth-century political philosopher affected late-nineteenth-century Canadian politics, and second, the way that contention was perpetuated by subsequent generations of historians. It is the argument of this dissertation that in the first case there was no “copying fidelity” whereas in the second case there was.

Regardless of what it may be called, the Burkanadian meme remains a little-studied phenomenon that continues to pop up in in academic and popular writing. It is perpetuated by

¹ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 192, 206, 208. More simply, the meme can be understood as the least unit of sociocultural information that is copied, and of which copies are faithful imitations of the original. This formulation combines the definitions of two theorists. British psychologist and memeticist Susan Blackmore has made the critical point that memes must be copied by imitation. See Susan Blackmore, “Imitation and the Definition of a Meme,” *Journal of Memetics – Evolutionary Models of Information Transmission* 2, no. 2 (December 1998): 160. Australian philosopher of biology John Wilkins supplied the conception of the meme as the smallest “something” (aka unit) that can be identified as a transmitter of culture. See John S. Wilkins, “What’s in a Meme? Reflections from the Perspective of the History and Philosophy of Evolutionary Biology,” *Journal of Memetics – Evolutionary Models of Information Transmission* 2, no. 1 (June 1998): 2-33.

² See, for example, Karen Bourrier, “Victorian Memes,” *Victorian Studies* 58, no. 2 (Winter 2016): 272-82.

writers referencing a predecessor as an authority. That authority had cited another predecessor. And so on. When traced back through this sequence of references, supposition rather than documentary proof is found to be the basis of the claim.

Literature Review

Part I) “The Tory Touch” and its Historiography

The Burkean claim was a specific version of a more general assertion, known as the “Tory Touch” thesis, that Anglo-Canadian political culture had always been more conservative than that of its American neighbour. According to this narrative, the American Revolution served as a sorting mechanism that dispatched the most conservative settlers of the Thirteen Colonies, the United Empire Loyalists, to become the founders of English Canada. The Loyalist exodus left the fledgling United States free to fully embrace Lockean liberal individualism. After their disastrous loss in the Revolutionary War, the British concluded that they had been too liberal in managing the Thirteen Colonies and determined not to repeat the error in their remaining British North American colonies. The Colonial Office would keep a firm lid on frontier liberty, making loyalty to the Crown the prime political principle. Thus, English Canada was from its founding distinguished by a “Tory Touch” of British conservatism that stressed authority, hierarchy, order, and community. Repeated invasions of Upper Canada from the U.S. during the War of 1812 made the threat of an American takeover very real, bolstering the cult of loyalty in that colony in particular.

Britishness remained a fundamental identity marker for Canadians until the mid-twentieth century. Being part of, and contributing to, the British Empire was one of the prime motivators of Confederation in the 1860s, part of the attraction of imperialism at the beginning of the

twentieth century, the basis for Canada's participation in numerous wars, and the source of countless disputes between French and English Canadians.³

The seminal Burkanadians grew up in a Canada that was truly British North American. Early twentieth-century English-Canadian political history was a story of nation building that saw Canada's Britishness as not just a distinguishing characteristic but a *raison d'être*. Canada's past was a narrative of steady if gradual progress from colony to nation, of an "evolution rather than revolution" in which the BNA colonies followed a peaceful "paper-strewn path" towards responsible government, unification, and eventual independence in sober contrast to the violent history of republican rebellion south of the border. Disputes over this interpretation were limited to details rather than its general trajectory or desirability. The superiority of British liberty was prevailing conventional wisdom amongst Anglophilic elites. In this view freedom was possible only within a stable social order rooted in tradition, as exemplified by British institutions of government.

After the Second World War, however, Canada's geopolitical context was in flux. The British Empire was in decline, and the United States had emerged as the world's new superpower. The Canadian economy had reoriented to a continental axis over the early part of the century, and in the context of the Cold War Canada found itself a junior partner of its southern neighbour ideologically, militarily, and diplomatically. American cultural influences flowed copiously across the border, seeping into every facet of daily life. The comforting

³ It is worth noting that the Burkean claim was very much an English-Canadian invention that had limited resonance in French Canada. French Canadians might understandably find it a stretch to exult in the influence of an eighteenth-century British Whig statesman on the constitution of Canada. There was some grudging respect amongst French-Canadian political elites for how British institutions of government had historically provided French Canada with the means of ensuring its survival, but this could not be pushed too far.

conviction that Canada was British, and would always remain British, was suddenly in doubt.

At this point Canada's Britishness began to come under close scholarly scrutiny. In the 1950s American political scientist Louis Hartz pioneered a theoretical framework for tracing the origin and development of the principle ideological strains in American political thought in *The Liberal Tradition* (1955). Later, in *The Founding of New Societies* (1964), he applied this framework to other New World polities that had evolved out of the European diaspora.⁴ According to Hartz, the political culture of a settler society, such as the Thirteen Colonies, began as an ideological fragment isolated from the rest of the European ideological spectrum. Over time, each fragment developed in relative isolation and shaped the character of the new polity. What was marginal in the mother country became central in each New World society.

Broadly, Hartz said, there were three ideological categories to which New World colonies might belong, either feudal (i.e. Latin America, French Canada), liberal (the U.S., English Canada), or radical (Australia). In the United States, the liberalism of John Locke went unchallenged and so political differences had evolved within the liberal tradition.⁵ Canada was a more difficult case since it was a dual-fragment society. It had both a feudal tradition (Quebec), and a liberal tradition (albeit one tinged with Loyalist Toryism) in English Canada.

To many observers in Canada, most notably political scientist Gad Horowitz, Hartz's conclusions about the relative strengths of ideological fragments in Canada were flawed. They argued that Hartz had neglected to apply rigorously his own theoretical framework to the

⁴ See Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955), and Louis Hartz, with contributions by Kenneth D. McRae and others, *The Founding of New Societies: Studies in the History of the United States, Latin America, South Africa, Canada, and Australia*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964).

⁵ K.D. McRae, "Louis Hartz's Concept of the Fragment Society and its Application to Canada," *Etudes canadiennes*, no. 5 (1978): 19.

Canadian experience. According to Horowitz, Hartz underestimated the lasting impact of the Tory strain that Loyalists had brought with them to English Canada. Whereas Hartz had largely dismissed its influence, Horowitz argued that it was in fact a vital fragment of its own.⁶ It represented the conservative element of American society that valued social order and tradition. It shared American liberal values but believed these were best guaranteed by traditional institutions, such as the monarchy, and threatened by republicanism. Loyalist liberalism had exhibited a communal concern for a holistic body politic that would later make Canada more fertile ground for socialism than the republican political culture of the United States.⁷

Horowitz's theory fit with a conventional narrative that had assigned conservative and liberal labels to the two principle political factions in Canada in the nineteenth-century. It saw the Conservative party as the standard-bearer of a Loyalist legacy that feared democracy and republicanism, venerated the monarchy, and preferred centralized, elite leadership of government. In contrast, liberals were reformers who agitated for individual rights, democracy and self-government. Canada's political history during the first half of the nineteenth-century was the story of the struggle between these forces.

That paradigm was challenged in the 1980s and 1990s by Janet Ajzenstat, Peter J. Smith, and others. They argued that the central ideological conflict of Pre-Confederation Canada was not between conservatives and liberals, but rather between Court Whigs and Country Whigs. It was a colonial version of an eighteenth to early-nineteenth-century conflict in the mother country

⁶ Gad Horowitz, "Conservatism, Liberalism, and Socialism in Canada: an Interpretation," in *Canadian Labour in Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968), 3-57.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 10-14, 19-20, 23-25. The Reformers eventually prevailed, but in a gradual fashion that stood in marked contrast to the U.S.'s much earlier, more violent resolution of the same issue. Canada's more conservative liberalism was evident in its colony-to-nation saga being one of evolution rather than revolution. It is this more conservative liberalism that commentators have tried to capture with the term "Burkean."

in which Burke and his ideas had played a critical part.⁸

Since all of these labels – Court Whigs and Country Whigs, as well as Tories and Reformers (and their alternative labels – conservatives and liberals, respectively) – will be integral later on when explaining the political culture of Pre-Confederation Canada in which Macdonald was raised, and then again in the context of my primary research, it is salutary to first pre-empt semantic confusion by explaining what each of these terms meant and how they have been applied by historians.

The distinction between Court and Country Whigs dates back to Britain's Glorious Revolution of 1688, when Whigs divided themselves between those (the Court) holding office under the Crown, and those (the Country) who opposed office-holding, fearing its corrupting-influence.⁹ To fully understand the evolution of these political factions would require a long digression into the intricacies and complexities of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British politics, so for the sake of brevity I will skip to what the distinction meant beginning at the start

⁸ See Janet Ajzenstat and Peter J. Smith, "Liberal-Republicanism: the Revisionist Picture of Canada's Founding," in *Canada's Origins: Liberal, Tory, or Republican?*, ed. Janet Ajzenstat and Peter J. Smith, (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1995), 1-18, and Peter J. Smith, "The Ideological Genesis of Canadian Confederation," Ph.D. diss., Carleton University, 1983. As Ajzenstat and Smith acknowledge, this new outlook was informed by the work of historians, such as J.G.A. Pocock and Bernard Bailyn, who shined new light on the importance of civic humanism and republicanism in the political developments in Britain and the United States. See, for example, J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975), and Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, (Cambridge, M.A.: Belknap Press, 1967). Bishop's University historian Louis-Georges Harvey has explained how the tradition of civic humanism and republicanism that informed the leaders of the American Revolution also shaped political discourse in French Canada prior to the Rebellions in 1837-1838. In particular, civic humanism was the primary critique of the Lockean liberalism that prevailed in Quebec under British rule, and by the 1820s-30s it was being articulated with increasing intensity by members of the parti Patriotes. See Louis-Georges Harvey, *Le Printemps de L'Amérique Française: Américanité, Anticolonialisme et Republicanisme dans le Discours Politique Québécois, 1805-1837*, (Montreal: Boréal, 2005), 34-39.

⁹ Smith, "Ideological Genesis of Canadian Confederation," 28.

of Burke's political career (1765).

The Court Whigs, having continued since 1688 to increase their share of the executive powers that had previously been reserved to the Crown, naturally accepted the consolidation of political and economic power under the executive branch, arguing that it was necessary to effectively administer government and ensure political stability. Economically, Court Whigs used the state as a credit instrument, ringing up national debt to expand trade and protect, indeed promote, commercial investments, in which many of them had a personal stake as well. Politically, they feared empowering the larger public with more representation in the House of Commons, shorter Parliaments, and extensions of the franchise to those without property. This stance accorded with their belief in a bounded or restrained liberty that prevented a degeneration into licentiousness. Court Whigs controlled British government for most of the seventeenth-century, beginning with Sir Robert Walpole's first administration in the 1720s.¹⁰

Defined by an uneasiness with regular proximity to power (because it was corrupting), the Country Whigs typically consigned themselves to the opposition benches. Whereas the Court Whigs included aristocrats as well as the new men of commerce and a few others (of which Burke was one) valued for their exceptional intellectual abilities, the Country Whigs were mostly a party of landed interests. Rooted in a tradition of what is generally called "civic humanism" (but which American scholars call "republicanism"), this group prized personal independence and liberty, virtue, and patriotism. They regarded the rise of a commercial society, a national debt, and the centralization of power as threats to these values. Idealizing the independent country gentleman as virtuous and incorruptible, they sought a more powerful House of

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

Commons and greater local autonomy.¹¹

While it was applied in many different contexts from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, the term “Tory” was, from the aftermath of the French Revolution onwards, used to describe the Court Whigs who identified with the Crown and the government. To this group were added some members of the opposition whose views had typically straddled the Court and Country Whig divide. Led by Edmund Burke and the Duke of Portland, this faction broke with the opposition leader, Charles Fox, and joined the ranks on William Pitt’s government side, because in the dangerous new political reality they believed that “the greatest threat to the British Constitution and liberty came not from the Crown but from the people, democracy.”¹²

In general, many of the political beliefs of the British Tories (who were, it must be restated, Court Whigs) were evident in the Tory party of pre-Confederation Canada. Indeed, in large part Toryism was consciously planted there at the start when the British government divided the Province of Quebec into Upper and Lower Canada in 1791. Having concluded that largely-unchecked democratic assemblies had cost them the original American colonies, the British determined to avoid making the same mistake twice. The government officials they sent to administer Canada and their supporters consistently defended the control exercised by the executive. They regularly used patronage, for example, to check democracy and ensure political stability.¹³

The Court Whig orientation of Canadian Tories can be seen most clearly in their repeated proposals for legislative and federal union. Two themes that were central to all such proposals

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 30-31. See also Peter J. Smith, “The Ideological Origins of Canadian Confederation,” in *Canada’s Origins: Liberal, Tory, or Republican?*, ed. Janet Ajzenstat and Peter J. Smith, (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1995), 48-50.

¹² Smith, “Ideological Genesis of Canadian Confederation,” 35, 36.

¹³ Smith, “Ideological Origins of Canadian Confederation,” 60-61.

included the need to strengthen the power of the Crown, and the need to provide outlets for ambitious politicians, since political stability could be threatened not only by democracy but also by men whose thwarted ambitions might lead them to stir up trouble.¹⁴ More importantly, their proposals for union were based on a commercial ideology and included “mounting a large public debt to finance public works.”¹⁵ According to Smith, these values remained the basis of Toryism until at least Confederation, by which time the Tories had been rebranded as the Conservative Party.

Alternatively, the opposition party in Canada – the “Reformers” – took many of their political ideas and values from the Country Whigs.¹⁶ Indeed, they regularly borrowed the language of civic humanism and republicanism used by the Country Whigs in Britain and their Jeffersonian and Jacksonian U.S. counterparts.¹⁷ Largely composed of small proprietors and petty producers, especially farmers, Reformers perceived the centralization of authority using the Crown’s influence and the incurring of public debt as threats to legislative independence and liberty. In place of centralized elite control, the Reform Party proposed “a one-class democracy” of virtuous and independent property owners who provided cheap, efficient, and debt-free

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 64-66.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 66-67.

¹⁶ As to why this group became known as the “Reform Party,” it is because “reform” and “reformer” were the words used and circulated most often by William Lyon Mackenzie (one of its leading voices) in his newspaper and in other opposition newspapers. See Duncan Koerber, “Early Political Parties as Mediated Communities: The Case of Upper Canada,” *Media History* 19, no. 2 (2013): 132.

¹⁷ Smith, “Ideological Origins of Canadian Confederation,” 55. Cited above, Bernard Bailyn’s study of revolutionary thought in America found that it reproduced the language of Britain’s Country Whig opposition. See, for example, Bailyn, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, 35. Bailyn also explained how Country Whig ideology was the basis of the Democratic-Republican Party’s policies from Thomas Jefferson in the 1790s to Andrew Jackson in the 1830s.

government responsive to local concerns.¹⁸

To further complicate matters, until the 1980s and 1990s, Canada's historians generally labelled the Tories "conservatives" and the Reform Party "liberals," retroactively assigning to each of them party designations that only consolidated around the time of Confederation.¹⁹ It bears repeating here that in this historiographical paradigm (from which the Burkanadians were working), Macdonald's Conservative Party was the inheritor of the old Tory conservatism, though it had included elements of Lockean liberalism, while the Reform Party was entirely liberal.²⁰ In the new paradigm, however, Macdonald's Conservatives were Court Whigs, which meant they were agents of state-assisted capitalist economic development and the disruptive change it generated. George Brown's Reform Party had started out based in the ideas of Country Whigs (civic humanism, republicanism), which were hostile to the Court Whig power nexus of state and capitalism.²¹ Brown moderated the party, moving it to the political centre by de-emphasizing its more radical elements and modelling it on the British Liberal Party.

With these distinctions in mind, I will henceforth use the terms "conservative" or "tory" (especially in the third and fourth chapters), to refer to the pro-Crown, pro-commercial development ideology of office-holding elites and their supporters in pre-Confederation Canada. In contrast, "liberal" will refer to the ideology of their pro-democracy political opponents who

¹⁸ Smith, "Ideological Origins of Canadian Confederation," 56-57.

¹⁹ Political party labels were much more fluid in the mid-nineteenth century than today, and a member of the Macdonald-Cartier coalition might have variously referred to himself as a "Tory," a "conservative," or a "liberal-conservative," and the group led by George Brown similarly had a variety of designations. In general, however, after Confederation the party labels stabilized to Conservative and Liberal, respectively (though it took decades for the old labels to disappear entirely).

²⁰ Ajzenstat and Smith, "Liberal-Republicanism," 1.

²¹ An economic system which, it should be noted, was radically different from its eighteenth-century mercantile form as industrial capitalism evolved in the late nineteenth century.

challenged ruling elites. Again, that usage is consistent with the fact that politically the Country Whigs were more liberal insofar as they privileged the rights of individuals (albeit only certain privileged individuals) over the state.

Where did Burke fit in? He spent much of his career in opposition denouncing corruption in the executive, and one of his early political missions (which he would later abandon) was to relax restrictions for Protestant dissenters. Both of these positions aligned him with the values of the Country Whigs.²² His response to the French Revolution complicated that affiliation. When a radical challenge confronted the status quo, he responded in classic Court Whig fashion. What this suggests, however, was that he was hard to pigeonhole. Burke was an independent thinker who theorized differently in response to different circumstances. His thought defied easy categorization.

It is salient to map the Burkean claim against this historiographical outline. Two points should be noted. First, the Burkanadians advanced it at the very moment that the conventional wisdom about Canada's Britishness was first being challenged. This suggests it was a direct response to a disruption of a traditional national identity consensus. Second, the claim was advanced at a time that the prevailing understanding of Canadian political history was that it was essentially an ongoing contest between liberalism and conservatism. That entire paradigm of interpretation was subsequently challenged by the Whig revisionism of the 1980s. What Edmund Burke was meant to mean in the first framework did not translate well into the second.

Part II) Intellectual History

Insofar as it contends that a particular set of ideas had a causal effect on Canada's

²² Smith, "Ideological Genesis of Canadian Confederation," 31.

historical development, the Burkean claim is a question of intellectual history. Depending on how it has been defined, intellectual history has been practiced since antiquity. The Ancient Greeks wrote “doxographical histories of philosophy,” for example, while Medieval scholars generated “genealogies” of thought and “Renaissance humanists compiled what they called ‘literary histories’” of astronomy and mathematics.²³ In the eighteenth century, similar efforts were being called the “history of the doctrine of ideas” or the “history of human ideas.”²⁴

In the Anglo-American tradition, different texts have been singled out as starting points for the establishment of intellectual history as a subdiscipline of professional historical scholarship.²⁵ Vernon L. Parrington’s *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927-1930) is one. Parrington set out to apply the insights of new school historians such as Charles A. Beard (1874-1948) and trace “the genesis and development of major American ideologies.”²⁶ More specifically, he was interested in “the paths by which ideas had shaped, and could reshape, the political and social order” in the United States.²⁷ Yet his methodology had been simply to study and analyze “certain political and economic ideas as revealed in writings” which he deemed to be literature, and was not a particularly rigorous model for studying the history of ideas.²⁸

Philosopher Arthur O. Lovejoy (1873-1962), a contemporary of Parrington, is generally

²³ Anthony Grafton, “The History of Ideas: Precept and Practice, 1950-2000 and Beyond,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 1 (January 2006): 11.

²⁴ Darrin M. McMahon, “The Return of the History of Ideas?,” chap. 1 in *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, ed. Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 15. See also Donald R. Kelley, *The Descent of Ideas: The History of Intellectual History*, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002).

²⁵ John Higham, Introduction to *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, ed. John Higham and Paul K. Conkin, (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), xi.

²⁶ John Higham, “The Rise of American Intellectual History,” *American Historical Review* 56, no. 3 (April 1951): 460. See also Vernon L. Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought*, 3 vols., (New York: Harcourt, 1927-1930).

²⁷ Grafton, “History of Ideas,” 11.

²⁸ Higham, “Rise of American Intellectual History,” 461.

recognized as the principal founder of the Anglo-American discipline of intellectual history.²⁹ In the 1920s, Lovejoy co-founded the “History of Ideas Club” at Johns Hopkins University, where he taught, and in 1940 he founded the *Journal of the History of Ideas*.³⁰ *The Great Chain of Being* (1936), the published collection of Lovejoy’s 1933 lectures, was a landmark that introduced a modern, interdisciplinary method to the field.³¹ It emphasized the study of formal systems of ideas in select texts, and its analytical terminology dominated the discipline for decades. Lovejoy’s fundamental premise that the history of ideas was an “attractive meeting point for many disciplines” remains true today.³²

As Lovejoy conceived of it, intellectual history would study the same material (philosophy, literature, politics, etc.) as the other branches of history, but from a unique perspective. He thought there had been a finite number of ideas (which he reduced to “units”) since time immemorial, each with a life of its own. These “unit-ideas” had been combined by thinkers and writers at different times in various forms, including philosophical doctrines.³³ The task of the historian of ideas was to break down such systems of thought into their “component elements, into what may be called their unit-ideas,” just as a chemist divided a chemical compound into its constituent elements.³⁴

Lovejoy naturally assumed that philosophers such as himself and historians would be at

²⁹ McMahan, “Return of the History of Ideas?,” 15.

³⁰ Grafton, “History of Ideas,” 8. The first number of the journal was written by Lovejoy himself. See Arthur O. Lovejoy, “Reflections on the History of Ideas,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 1, no. 1 (January 1940): 3-23.

³¹ Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936).

³² Grafton, “History of Ideas,” 30.

³³ Arthur O. Lovejoy, “Introduction: The Study of the History of Ideas,” chap. 1 in *The Great Chain of Being*, 3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

the centre of such projects, but he also imagined that “scrupulous scholars from every humanistic discipline,” and even from the sciences, would be needed to complete an exhaustive treatment of a text and the unit-ideas that it contained.³⁵ He argued that most often “the quest of a historical understanding even of single passages often drives the student into fields which at first seem remote enough from his original topic of investigation.”³⁶ Thus, Lovejoy argued that a full and proper reading of, for example, John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667), required an expert knowledge not just of literature and theology, but of aesthetics, philosophy, and sciences such as astronomy.³⁷

While Lovejoy opposed attempts to “reduce an individual’s ideas to the mere reflection of social position, personal biography, [and] economic interest,” he insisted that some attention should be paid to context.³⁸ While the author’s text should be the primary focus of study, an exhaustive analysis nevertheless required “going beyond the work itself” to obtain a “knowledge – or an assumption – about what [the author] was trying to do, which can by no means always be safely or fully inferred from the obvious content of the work.”³⁹ Moreover, the intellectual historian needed to possess “a firm ability to distinguish the various meanings of particular words and phrases in the texts of a given period.”⁴⁰

Among other important early contributors who helped to define the practice of intellectual history, social and intellectual historian Merle Curti (1897-1996) stands out because

³⁵ Grafton, “History of Ideas,” 7.

³⁶ Arthur O. Lovejoy, “The Historiography of Ideas,” in *Essays in the History of Ideas*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1948), 6.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁸ McMahan, “Return of the History of Ideas?,” 20.

³⁹ Lovejoy, “Reflections on the History of Ideas,” 13-14.

⁴⁰ Grafton, “History of Ideas,” 7.

his approach differed distinctly from that of Lovejoy.⁴¹ In *The Growth of American Thought* (1943), Curti outlined what he called a “socio-economic history” of American thought.⁴² Eschewing Lovejoy’s focus on what Curti called the “interiors” of ideas and systems, he emphasised instead the need to attend to the “interrelationships between the growth of thought and the whole social milieu,” including institutional and environmental factors, such as public schooling and the press, that affected the growth of knowledge.⁴³ While Lovejoy emphasized the “internal or intrinsic history of ideas,” Curti privileged the “extrinsic or ‘contextual’ view of intellectual history.”⁴⁴

In *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (1932), historian Carl Becker drew attention to a different problem faced by intellectual historians, the temptation to draw overly-simplistic conclusions from the presence of similar ideas or terminology in the work of different authors.⁴⁵ Many historians of culture, he noted, had a tendency to naïvely assume that ideas could be transferred from one person to the next “as if it were no more than a matter of borrowed coins,” and that “Mr. Jones must have got a certain idea from Mr. Smith because it can

⁴¹ Higham, Introduction to *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, xi.

⁴² Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*, (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1943), x.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, x, ix.

⁴⁴ Dominick LaCapra, “Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts,” chap. 1 in *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983), 24. It should be noted that Lovejoy, Curti, and other founders of the discipline often qualified their methods by noting many of the same concerns that preoccupy intellectual historians today. Lovejoy, for example, cautioned that because historians of ideas must gather knowledge from many different fields, they are “liable to the errors which lie in wait for the non-specialist” (Lovejoy, “Introduction: Study of the History of Ideas,” 21). Thus, his emphasis upon a collaborative project of specialists. He further warned against mistaking “a part of the thought of any one philosopher or any one age” for the whole thought of either (*Ibid.*).

⁴⁵ Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932).

be shown that he had read Mr. Smith's book."⁴⁶ In this hypothetical case, it is possible that if Mr. Jones had not already had the idea, or something equivalent, he may not have gravitated toward Mr. Smith's book, or he may have read and discarded it without another thought. (Since part of my study of Macdonald involves scrutinising the literature that he consumed for ideas and terminology reminiscent of Burke, Becker's point about drawing overly-simplistic conclusions about influence is well-taken.)

Between the end of the Second World War and the early 1960s, the history of ideas gained considerable prestige, emerging at the cutting edge of the discipline, "an intellectual seismic zone where the tectonic plates of disciplines converged."⁴⁷ Its growth came in part because its project to discover and explain the history of American ideas fit with post-war confidence and conformity.⁴⁸ At the peak of its popularity around 1960, "intellectual history had seemed to offer the master key that could unlock" the secrets of the American past, and its practitioners, emboldened, made increasingly grandiose claims "in the name of an 'American mind'" or character premised mostly on their readings of select texts.⁴⁹

Soon, however, challenges to intellectual history emerged both from within and from outside the discipline. In the first case, historians of political thought like Bernard Bailyn and Quentin Skinner argued that greater attention should be paid to the context in which the text was produced and to the particular language of the text itself. Bailyn "provided a new way to follow ideas into action" by studying the language of American revolutionary thought as it had been

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁴⁷ Grafton, "History of Ideas," 2.

⁴⁸ Laurence Veysey, "Intellectual History and the New Social History," in *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, ed. John Higham and Paul K. Conkin, (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 3.

⁴⁹ Higham, Introduction to *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, xii.

expressed in pamphlets, newspapers, and other widely-shared print sources.⁵⁰ In *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967), Bailyn demonstrated that the pamphlets written by American colonists had stressed the ideological, constitutional, and political roots of the colonists' struggle for independence, and he concluded that this reflected a broad consensus of colonial thought in the decades before the Revolution.⁵¹

Quentin Skinner's work had a profound impact, even offering "a new version of intellectual history itself."⁵² He and Pocock, the leaders of the "Cambridge School," reimagined intellectual history as the study of "ideas in context."⁵³ Skinner, in his landmark essay "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," noted the abuses that too-commonly came from an ignorance of context.⁵⁴ For instance, there was the "mythology of doctrines," which Skinner explained as the tendency of "converting some scattered or quite incidental remarks by a classic theorist" into his or her "doctrine".⁵⁵ Looking back in search of patterns, modern commentators were susceptible to viewing such remarks as part of a coherent system of thought or to reading them as origins of a later doctrine to which, in actuality, they had no connection.

To Skinner, it was important to take ideas "out of the clouds of such abstractions" and

⁵⁰ Grafton, "History of Ideas," 4.

⁵¹ In some ways, Bailyn introduced marked improvements to the methodology of intellectual history. For one, he chose carefully his object of study – the pamphlet – and defended that choice with convincing logic. He also strenuously attended to the language of the pamphlets, and with near-scientific precision he recorded every historical reference to authors and ideas. Despite this, however, his methodology was still largely straightforward empiricism.

⁵² Grafton, "History of Ideas," 4.

⁵³ McMahon, "Return of the History of Ideas?," 15. McMahon is careful to point out that while Skinner's and Pocock's "methods and approaches are by no means identical," they are "closely allied" in that they "understand political language as speech acts" that must be situated in their appropriate "discursive contexts" (*Ibid.*, 17).

⁵⁴ Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," chap. 2 in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*, ed. James Tully (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1988).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

root them “in a specific time and place, with all its local inflection and color.”⁵⁶ The historian must immerse herself in the context, lingering there long enough to “learn the language and get the jokes,” to develop “an ear for the *patois*,” and to become familiar with “the intentions with which ideas were employed, and the uses to which they were put.”⁵⁷

As intellectual history worked through these methodological issues, it suddenly found its luminous status eclipsed. By the 1970s social history had replaced it as the cutting edge of the discipline.⁵⁸ The central thrust of the new paradigm was that “the reality of history lay in the social and economic experience of ordinary, rather than elite, groups.”⁵⁹ Whereas intellectual history focused on members of elites who had the capacity to think and write and whose works were preserved in the historical record, social history was interested in the poor, the working classes, women, racial minorities, and other historically-marginalized groups. The new working assumption was that “social reality was fundamentally material and behavioural in nature,” and that ideas were not critical to the lived reality of everyday people.⁶⁰ Indeed, for a time, statistical analysis and other quantitative methods traditionally associated with the social sciences became central to the practice of history.

To remain relevant, many intellectual historians responded by adapting their methods to make them acceptable to “the prevailing dogmas of social history,” devoting less attention to

⁵⁶ McMahon, “Return of the History of Ideas?” 24.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ See Angus Burgin, “New Directions, Then and Now,” chap. 17 in *The Worlds of American Intellectual History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). Historian John Higham, perhaps the most attentive chronicler of the discipline, was “far from alone in his sense that the field had entered a state of decline” (*Ibid.*, 346).

⁵⁹ Daniel Wickberg, “Intellectual History vs. the Social History of Ideas,” *Rethinking History* 5, no. 3 (2001): 385. The political conflicts of the 1960s also exposed the myth of a monolithic American “mind” or “culture” on which the project of intellectual history had been based (*Ibid.*). See also Grafton, “History of Ideas,” 3.

⁶⁰ Wickberg, “Intellectual History vs. the Social History of Ideas,” 386, 385.

thought except in social contexts such as the university in which thought was work.⁶¹ Proponents of intellectual history fought a rearguard action, swearing that henceforth they would be more circumspect in their claims and more catholic in their research.⁶²

In the 1980s, however, developments in linguistics gave rise to the charge that social history had been insensitive to “the constitutive role of language” in the construction and experience of reality.⁶³ A central tenet of the cultural (or “linguistic”) turn was that social experience was largely constructed through the signs and structures of language.⁶⁴ There was no “primal anterior reality” to language: hierarchies of class and gender, for instance, existed only as products of consciousness.⁶⁵ The reification of language challenged historical materialism, a central theoretical pillar of social history, by placing discourse beyond the “social, economic, and political relations” that materialists argued had structured and framed everyone’s lives.⁶⁶ In response, many social historians transformed themselves into “socio-cultural historians” concerned with socially constructed categories such as “whiteness” or “gender.”⁶⁷

The linguistic turn in fact reinvigorated the study of the history of ideas.⁶⁸ At the same time it expanded the project of intellectual history “from the study of texts to the wider one of

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 386.

⁶² Burgin, “*New Directions, Then and Now*,” 348. For a more detailed outline of such an approach, see Laurence Veysey, “Intellectual History and the New Social History,” in *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, ed. John Higham and Paul K. Conkin, (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 3-26.

⁶³ McMahan, “Return of the History of Ideas?” 16.

⁶⁴ Bryan Palmer, “The Discovery/Deconstruction of the Word/Sign,” chap. 1 in *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 3.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁷ Wickberg, “Intellectual History vs. the Social History of Ideas,” 388.

⁶⁸ Grafton, “History of Ideas,” 24.

how humans make meaning in their environment.”⁶⁹ Historians focused on communities of discourse “looking for the assumptions and practices” that shaped habits of mind and gave them coherence and power.⁷⁰

Indeed, recent decades have seen the erasure of “distinct boundaries between intellectual, cultural and social histories.”⁷¹ Intellectual history’s belief in the potency of ideas has won new adherents across the humanities and social sciences disciplines. The impact of social and cultural history is evident in how intellectual historians’ analyses of texts now pay closer attention to material factors, to literary forms, to racism, sexism, heteronormativity, and other systemic biases, and, above all, to how discourse constitutes knowledge that both serves and produces power. Much as Lovejoy had imagined it, the history of ideas is interdisciplinary, a meeting ground for the humanities and social sciences.

Methodology

The underlying methodology of this work is historical in that it generates evidence about the past by researching primary and secondary sources of information. One challenge inherent in this approach is discovering all the relevant sources that are available. Historical methodology also involves critical assessment of sources. The researcher must be sensitive to the rhetorical construction and purpose of sources, both primary and secondary. Understanding their strengths, limitations and biases and cross-referencing them to compensate for the weaknesses of any one type is essential in order to generate reliable evidence. This evidence can then be analyzed to identify meaningful factors and patterns. In practice this requires the researcher to make

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Wickberg, “Intellectual History vs. the Social History of Ideas,” 383.

judgments about ambiguous objects of inquiry by identifying, inter-relating and weighing the relative significance of diverse types of information. All of these methodological issues arise in the pages that follow.

While the above considerations apply throughout, this work involves three distinct investigations, each of which requires an additional methodological approach. Part One is a probe for historical evidence of the Burkean claim that draws on primary and secondary sources relating to Macdonald and his role in Confederation and analyses them by applying intellectual history methods and concepts. Part Two applies a political economy analysis to the same sources to demonstrate it has greater explanatory power than the Burkean claim. Part Three seeks an alternative explanation for the Burkean claim in the historical moment in which it was first advanced, explaining it in terms of the ideology and practices of nationalism generally and the specific dynamics of Canadian nationalism at that time.

Part One

This is the lengthiest of the three methodology sections because it applies to the bulk of the primary research conducted for this thesis and underpins its fundamental argument that there is no convincing evidence of a formative Burkean influence on Canadian political culture. As mentioned above, this study fits into the historical subdiscipline of intellectual history, which relies on the close reading of texts to identify influential ideas, beliefs, and patterns of thought.

The literature review above provided an historical overview of intellectual history that highlighted some of its particular methodological issues. For the sake of ready reference when discussing my primary research of Macdonald, this dissertation adopts the following terminology to describe the three most relevant methodological issues.

First, there is what I will term the “coherence fallacy.” Intellectual historians are predisposed to privilege ideology. Since they set out looking for coherent ideology they may find one in circumstances in which no such systematic set of beliefs were necessarily operative. Moreover, they are susceptible to finding coherent ideologies operating as trans-historical causal forces in different places and times (this could be termed the “inter-contextual coherence fallacy). Yet one cannot assume, for example, that the meanings of conservatism and liberalism have remained unchanged in different historical contexts. Do ideas have a fixed meaning and existence outside of time, as Lovejoy thought? Or are they shaped and given value by their particular historical contexts? This issue is particularly relevant to the way Burke’s meaning changed between his death and the years of Macdonald’s intellectual formation.

Second comes the “cherry picking” fallacy. This is operative when a historical actor clearly states ideational motivation. The problem is that they may explicitly cite an idea to rationalize action without any firm understanding of it. They may be committing the inter-contextual coherence fallacy discussed above. Alternatively, they might understand the idea well enough on its own terms without understanding in any meaningful systematic way the ideology of which it is a part. This issue is especially relevant given how Burke was used and abused historically, and is operative at the end of Chapter Three when the Burkean Test is applied to the young Macdonald. Cherry picking exists on another level in this dissertation, however, because the Burkanadians were guilty of it in their invocation of the Burkean claim.

Third, there is the “causality fallacy,” which concerns the dilemma of how to properly evaluate the causal relationship between the invocation of an idea and action. A historical actor such as Macdonald may state an idea, and even claim to be motivated by that idea, but that does not prove that they acted on the basis of that idea, or they may be acting on the basis of an idea

without consciously realizing it, let alone articulating it. This is the problem of “immanent ideology,” a term that describes situations in which a way of thinking is so ingrained that it is unquestioned and largely goes unspoken. This methodological problem is particularly relevant to this dissertation because Macdonald and most other key politicians of the Confederation period offered no explicit explanation of the philosophical underpinnings or political origins of their ideas. Are we then to assume they had no political philosophy? Or simply that were they working within a consensus with little need to reference first principles? Immanent ideology is by definition not susceptible to historical proof, which is why it is so difficult to state definitively that Macdonald was not influenced by Burkean ideas.

It bears repeating that intellectual history is not a social science discipline with a systematic methodology in the sense of a set of research methods and analytical procedures that, when applied rigorously, will yield incontrovertible evidence.⁷² That said, it does, however, have

⁷² In this regard it is interesting to note that intellectual history’s engagement with social history, cultural history and the post-linguistic-turn humanities and social science scholarship more generally have not much affected its methodology. In the 1980s and 1990s the field of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) emerged from “critical linguistics, critical semiotics and in general from a socio-politically conscious and oppositional way of investigating language, discourse and communication” (Teun A. van Dijk, “Aims of Critical Discourse Analysis,” *Japanese Discourse* 1, (1995): 17). Given its origins in the social sciences and its imposing name, one might have expected CDA to provide a rigorous new methodology for discerning the meanings of texts. While CDA practitioners share a common interest in “demystifying ideologies and power,” they have not come up with a methodological approach superior to or even supplementary to that of intellectual history (Ruth Wodak, “Critical Discourse Analysis,” in *Qualitative Research Practice*, ed. Clive Seale, Giampietro Gobo, Jaber F. Gubrium and David Silverman, (London: Sage, 2004), 186. See also Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak, “Critical Discourse Analysis,” in *Introduction to Discourse Analysis*, ed. T.A. van Dijk, (London: Sage, 1997), 258). No doubt developments in the field prior to the linguistic turn precluded any such methodological precision. Drawing on the insights of semiotics, cultural anthropologists had in the 1960s advanced structuralist analyses in which cultures and their artifacts were interpreted as having internal logics discernible to expert analysis. Structuralism was, however, quickly superseded by post-structuralism, a contrary creed that emphasized the instability of the sign and the contingency of meaning. The social science approach to analyzing discourse, it turned out, was no more scientific than the traditional humanistic scholarship of intellectual history. The

a tradition of qualitative content analysis practiced and refined by generations of scholars. Many of the above concerns overlap with historical scholarship in general, yet they manifest uniquely within the sub-discipline, which has developed its own best practices related to them. The search for Burke that follows will be conducted with all of these methodological considerations in mind.

This dissertation offers a methodical, step-by-step investigation of the Burkean claim. The first step is to define Burke's major contributions to British political philosophy in order to develop a specific understanding of what might constitute a Burkean legacy. This necessitated establishing his main political ideas. To this end I read Burke's principal texts, including his significant political tracts and speeches, and a wide range of secondary sources on Burke and his thought from different time periods.

It is difficult to isolate what in the British political tradition is uniquely Burkean because he both borrowed from and came to represent that tradition. To complicate matters, Burke's ideas were more often than not misunderstood or misused by others. The problem compounds when one considers Burke's intellectual legacy over time. His thought has always been a subject of debate, and his popular meaning has undergone several transformations.⁷³ In some cases, Burke's ideas survived only as aphorisms or general maxims abstracted from their historical contexts. Over time, the expressions survived in the political lexicon but their original author and

linguistic turn's contribution to the methodology of discourse analysis has been to reinforce the importance of close reading and rigorous analysis of texts to recognize key concepts and patterns of argumentation. It has heightened awareness of the significance of social and cultural context. Its emphasis on how a discourse can naturalize a power/knowledge nexus is likewise salutary, but does not offer any substantially different methodological approach to discourse analysis.

⁷³ The second chapter will show that Burke meant different things to his contemporaries, to Macdonald's generation in the mid-nineteenth century, to historians in the mid-twentieth century when his thought was rehabilitated, and so on up to the present day. While each generation might agree on a few core Burkean tenets, each tended to construe the spirit of his thought in ways that fit their own particular zeitgeist or suited their polemical imperatives.

meaning faded as politicians used them to suit new circumstances. Often those borrowing from Burke were not even aware of the source.⁷⁴ All of this makes it difficult to establish a straightforward Burkean intellectual genealogy.

To address this problem, this dissertation develops a test organized around three themes. The first theme organizes Burke's thoughts on the general subject of reform, including when he believed reforms were desirable and practicable. The second theme groups together Burke's ideas about the form and composition of government, including his trust in the balanced Constitution and his anxieties about democracy. The third theme covers his thinking on the appropriate role of the state in the lives of citizens and the individual rights and protections to which citizens are entitled.

Such an approach is not without precedent, and in fact has had a specific and vigorous application in scholarship. In the 1970s, McMaster University's Tom Truman developed a scale for measuring "toryism-conservatism in both English Canada and the United States."⁷⁵ Inspired by the debates over Horowitz's writings on the subject, Truman set out to test the notion that English-Canadian political culture really was more "Tory" than that of America. He deduced seven main themes of toryism-conservatism after reading "the writings and speeches of British Tories and British and Canadian Conservatives."⁷⁶ As Truman himself pointed out, he was hardly being innovative; he was building on the work of American political scientist Herbert McClosky, who decades earlier had constructed a nine-item conservatism scale using methods

⁷⁴ Sir James Prior, *Memoir of the Life and Character of the Rt.-Hon. Edmund Burke*, (New York: Franklin, 1968), 2:441.

⁷⁵ Tom Truman, "A Scale for Measuring a Tory Streak in Canada and the United States," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 10, no. 3 (September 1977): 597.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 598.

that Truman was adapting.⁷⁷ The Burkean test will be described at length in Chapter Two, which deals with Burke's ideas and influence in late-eighteenth-century British politics.

Having established what a Burkean legacy might look like, the dissertation then turns to seeking evidence of it in the political thought and works of John A. Macdonald. This investigation is organized around two questions. First, is there evidence that Macdonald was familiar with Burke's political thought? Second, can it be demonstrated that Macdonald's political thinking and/or actions, especially in the critical years of nation-building, were influenced, even in part, by Burke's ideas?

To address the first question, I investigated whether all or parts of Burke's political philosophy could have been an influence on Macdonald's intellectual formation. I therefore conducted an exhaustive study of sources on the intellectual and political culture of the Kingston of his youth.

To address the second question, primary research was conducted on Macdonald, with a heavy focus on (but not limited to) his letters and public statements for the years 1857-1867.⁷⁸ The goal was to find Macdonald going on record as someone who read and admired Burke, and consciously adopted his thought. Macdonald's friend D'Arcy McGee, for example, once said to his constituents that he conceived of himself as a successor to "all the illustrious Irish statesmen of the past...above all, Burke."⁷⁹ In the context of all the intellectual history methodological issues discussed hitherto, this kind of statement represents the gold standard of proof: solid

⁷⁷ See Herbert McClosky, "Conservatism and Personality," *American Political Science Review* 52, no. 1 (March 1958): 27-45.

⁷⁸ By selecting the effective date for the BNA Act, I wish to avoid any semantic confusion. As some scholars have argued, there are ways in which the "Confederation project" may be regarded as yet incomplete or unfinished.

⁷⁹ Thomas D'Arcy McGee, in the *Montreal Gazette*, Montreal, July 31, 1863.

historical evidence of a direct definitive influence against which to measure Macdonald's statements.

The focus on Macdonald was supplemented by reading the notes taken by participants at the Charlottetown and Quebec City conferences. I studied the meeting minutes recorded by Hewitt Bernard, the official minute taker, as well as the detailed reports of Sir Edward Whelan and John Hamilton Gray. Each provided a textual record of what had been said by those who attended the conferences. I also analysed the text of the British North America Act, 1867.⁸⁰ This research covers the critical time span from the late 1850s, when union became a serious proposition for politicians on both sides of the Atlantic, to the achievement of Confederation a decade later.⁸¹

Part Two

Having demonstrated the weakness of the Burkean claim, the dissertation then turns to considering an alternative explanation for Macdonald's politics generally, and for Confederation in particular. The literature review briefly touched on the issue of the agency of ideas. One of the central debates in intellectual history revolves around the causal agency of ideas. On the one

⁸⁰ Given Burke's historical stature as a political philosopher and as a statesman, it would be surprising if his ideas and their impact in Quebec had not been analysed by French Canadian historians and political thinkers. A brief online search, for example, returned a newspaper article by the esteemed sociologist Joseph Yvon Thériault, a professor at the Université du Québec à Montréal. See Joseph Yvon Thériault, "Le Devoir de philo - Identité: le manifeste de Burke," *Le Devoir*, April 10, 2010, Accessed March 11, 2018, <http://www.ledevoir.com/societe/le-devoir-de-philo-histoire/286700/le-devoir-de-philo-identite-le-manifeste-de-burke>. For some discussions of the history of ideas in Quebec, see Yvan Lamonde, *Histoire sociale des idées au Québec*, (Saint-Laurent, Québec: Fides, 2000).

⁸¹ For example, in 1858, Alexander Tilloch Galt joined with Macdonald and Cartier's ministry on the condition that they take up a federation of British North American colonies. See O.D. Skelton, *The Life and Times of Sir Alexander Tilloch Galt*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1920).

hand, the idealist theory of ideology asserts that “people reason about their lives and that this reasoning shapes their behaviour and institutions.”⁸² In that case, actions are the outcome of ideas and beliefs, and decisions about the design of political, economic, and social systems are made only after arriving at a system of ideas and beliefs. The most influential exponent of the idealist theory was the German philosopher Hegel (1770-1831), who posited that history is determined by the conflict, or dialectic, of competing ideas.⁸³ Marx, often said to have taken Hegel’s views and turned them on their head, developed a materialist orientation that situated ideas in their socio-economic context. Ideology and its significance, in Marx’s historical materialist orientation, is a complex and reciprocal relationship between a fundamentally economic base and an at times influential superstructure. For Marx and the Marxist tradition, the role of ideas/discourses, and the place of ideology and its relationship to political practice, is always best understood as being mediated by the nature of productive life.⁸⁴

To test the explanatory power of the idealist Burkean claim, this section offers an alternative materialist interpretation of Macdonald and Confederation. It conducts a political economy analysis that explains the importance of economic development in Macdonald’s politics and the Confederation project as a whole. In general terms, political economy studies how the relationship between the state and market forces affects the “production and distribution of wealth.”⁸⁵ It considers, for example, how the political choices made by governments influence the functioning of the economy, and conversely how businesses influence the state (or, more

⁸² Reo M. Christenson et al., *Ideologies and Modern Politics*, 3rd ed., (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 8-9.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸⁴ See Jorge Larrain, “Ideology,” in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, ed. Tom Bottomore, (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 219-23.

⁸⁵ Michael Howlett and M. Ramesh, *The Political Economy of Canada: An Introduction*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1992), 10.

generally, how capitalism shapes liberal democracy).⁸⁶ In other words, “political economy . . . is the study of the laws and relations of capitalist development, either critically from the Marxist perspective, or more traditionally from the liberal view affirming the legitimacy of that social system.”⁸⁷ In contrast to modern quantitative economics, which is uninterested in social, cultural, and political considerations that affect the decisions of economic actors, political economy “is a study of society as an integrated whole “that combines the perspectives of multiple disciplines.”⁸⁸ The task of the political economist is to “analyze . . . social relations as they relate to the economic system of production.”⁸⁹

In Canada, there has been a long and rich political economy tradition, dating back to Harold Adams Innis, Donald Creighton, and others. That tradition has undergone a number of transformations since its founding. However, since this dissertation is concerned with the development of the Canadian economy only up to the 1870s, I will be relying upon the founders, whose studies “constitute a primary body of knowledge and research” on the development of capitalism in Canada “from its pre-industrial origins to the end of the national policy.”⁹⁰

Briefly, the founders of the tradition focused on the role of the staple, studying the implications of the export of raw materials to the advanced economies of Europe and the United States. Innis’ “staple theory” was that the motor of development was not manufacturing, but “the growth of export-led sectors” such as furs, fish, and timber that spurred industrialization in the

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Daniel Drache, “Rediscovering Canadian Political Economy,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 11, no. 3 (August 1976): 4.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 5; see also Michael Howlett and M. Ramesh, *The Political Economy of Canada*, 18-19. Harold Innis was representative of the diversity of disciplines which could be brought to bear within political economy. His work examined the state, culture, communications, and the economy.

⁸⁹ Drache, “Rediscovering Canadian Political Economy,” 4.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

already-advanced economies while maintaining Canada's dependency on the demand of foreign markets for their resources.⁹¹

While applying this theoretical framework, my research methodology will remain historical. Evidence that Macdonald was motivated by economic development considerations will be sought in the content of his correspondence and public statements, and particularly in the compromises he made to secure passage of the BNA Act. It says a great deal about Macdonald's motivations that he was willing to accept, for example, a federated state despite his oft-repeated preference for a legislative union.

Part Three

Given that Part One produced no support for Burke's influence in Macdonald's Confederation project and Part Two offered, in contrast, a substantial alternative explanation, the question arises of whether it was present-day exigencies rather than historical evidence that motivated the Burkanadians to advance their claim. Did they make this argument to bolster their conception of Canadian identity? To answer this question a historical methodology, along with the more specialized methodology of intellectual history, is again applied. Research has been conducted in secondary sources on postwar Canada, focusing particularly on intellectual debates over the country's future. Yet here again the particular nature of the investigation recommends a different theoretical lens, in this case one that draws on scholarship on nations and nationalism. Nationalism studies focus on the nature of nations and the ways in which claims about their

⁹¹ *Ibid.*; see also Michael Howlett and M. Ramesh, "Staples Political Economy," chap. 4 in *The Political Economy of Canada*.

identities are created and contested.⁹² Modern nationalism scholarship takes a social construction approach to these questions. Two approaches that are particularly relevant to this investigation are ethnosymbolism and the invention of tradition.

Anthony Smith and John Hutchinson have pioneered the ethnosymbolist approach. The foci of a nation's identity, they argue, is its origins in a particular ethnic group, real or imagined, far back in time.⁹³ Nationalists seek to discover and instrumentalize the nation's authentic ethnic antecedents.⁹⁴ They do this through cultural work that constantly deploys myth, symbol and narrative to invoke the core ethnic in order to maintain a lively sense of national belonging.⁹⁵ It is not hard to see in the Burkean claim, for example, an attempt to recover and authenticate Canada's British ethnicity.

Eric Hobsbawm coined the term "the invention of tradition" to describe how elites fabricate history to cultivate a sense of collective solidarity stretching back into the distant reaches of time.⁹⁶ Such traditions include public ceremonies and official holidays (i.e. Bastille Day in France, Victoria Day in Canada) and statue-building to honour national heroes. All are "sociopolitical constructs forged, even fabricated, by cultural engineers" such as politicians and academics.⁹⁷ The "Tory Touch" mythology has been commemorated in the spectacle and

⁹² According to theorist Anthony Smith, a nation is "a named human population occupying a historic territory or homeland and sharing common myths and memories" as well as a mass culture, while nationalism is an ideology dedicated to "the attainment and maintenance of autonomy, unity, and identity" on behalf of the nation's members (Anthony Smith, *The Nation in History: Historiographical Debates about Ethnicity and Nationalism*, (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2000), 3).

⁹³ Smith, *Nation in History*, 63.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," chap. 1 in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

⁹⁷ Smith, *Nation in History*, 53.

pageantry of Royal visits, the daily rituals of schoolchildren pledging allegiance to the monarch, and the work of nationalist historians invested more in the nation than in original historical research. The Burkean claim seems a likely candidate for elevation to this Canadian pantheon of invented traditions.

My analysis of the Burkean claim, then, will approach it as part of the discursive construction of nation. Communicating effectively to a distracted public requires broad strokes, so nationalist discourse is most effective when it takes the form of an instantly and broadly recognizable shorthand. In this context, Burke might best be understood as a symbol used by the conservative nationalists to evoke and revitalize a cherished myth.

Chapter Outline

The body of the dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter One, “The Burkean Claim in Canada – Its Origins and Afterlife,” describes the origins of the Burke notion and the Burkanadians who gave it life, then describes how the claim has lived on through successive generations of Canadian political scholarship.

Entitled “A Burkean ‘Test,’” Chapter Two begins by providing historical background on Edmund Burke, then moves on to analyze his political philosophy. His key ideas are then organized into a taxonomy against which Macdonald’s “Burkeaniness” may subsequently be tested.

Chapter Three is where the dissertation pivots to Macdonald. As its title – “The Burkean Legacy in Macdonald’s Formative Years” – conveys, it considers the avenues through which Burkean thought could have influenced Macdonald in his youth. It describes how Kingston was a likely transit point for Burke’s ideas because it was a large, strategically-important settlement

with a strong imperial presence that maintained a flow of thought from Britain to the colony.

Chapter Four, “Looking for Burke in Macdonald’s Confederation Project,” discusses Macdonald the politician during the critical years leading up to Confederation. It applies the Burkean test to the Macdonald textual record and concludes there is negligible evidence of Burke as a formative intellectual influence upon Macdonald. Rather than a thinker agonizing over philosophical first principles, Macdonald is seen as, variously, a party leader managing internal conflict, an administrator dealing with the mundane daily tasks of office, and a politician with a simple public platform of economic progress and maintaining the bonds of Empire. The chapter concludes that Confederation was not imbued with the Burkean spirit in any meaningful way.

In order to provide a comparative standard by which to measure the strength of the Burkean claim, Chapter Five interprets Macdonald and Confederation through a political economy lens, concluding that there is comparatively rich evidence for this materialist approach. Titled “Something Borrowed, Something Burke,” the chapter goes on to discuss the relationship of American and Canadian historiography in the twentieth century, noting how Canadian historians have followed American historiographical fashion in trying to create a unique past for their country.

The Conclusion reflects on the outcomes of this investigation. It begins by describing the irony of the dissertation’s title, and relates the search for proof of the Burkean claim to chasing after shadows. It revisits principle arguments, including the logic and evidence supporting them, and calls for the Burkean claim to finally be put to rest.

The turn to social history and cultural studies, which successfully overturned so many of the old assumptions and interpretations of Canada’s historical development, ironically extended the lifespan of others, the Burkean claim among them. Diminished interest in political history has

left the field under-researched in recent decades. Old topics are relitigated within new theoretical frameworks, often without the illumination of new research results. This state of affairs has allowed the Burkean meme to thrive despite its shaky origins in what was at best conjecture and at worst deliberate misrepresentation. So convinced of Burke's importance to the Fathers of Confederation was Ajzenstat that she considered a serious study of his influence.⁹⁸ McGill historian Brian Young, whose work focused on Quebec in the nineteenth-century, says he is "absolutely convinced" of Burke's influence upon Father of Confederation Sir George-Étienne Cartier.⁹⁹ By conducting a thorough historical probe for evidence of a formative Burkean influence on Canadian political culture, this dissertation strives to grasp the shadow Burke has cast on Canadian historiography.

⁹⁸ Janet Ajzenstat, *The Canadian Founding: John Locke and Parliament*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 6.

⁹⁹ Brian Young, email message to Matthew Cain, June 21, 2016.

CHAPTER ONE:
THE BURKEAN CLAIM IN CANADA – ITS ORIGINS AND AFTERLIFE

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the reader to the history of the Burkean claim in Canada and to demonstrate its continued relevance in academic and popular discourses of Canadian political culture. It is, as far as I have been able to find, the first attempt to catalogue the many instances in which the Burkean claim has been invoked in writing about politics in Canada. Interestingly, there has been no one consistent reason, or set of reasons, that his influence has been deemed significant, unless the vague equation of Burke with the British political tradition in general can be regarded as the reason. Nevertheless, the invocations of Burke by different generations of scholars over more than seven decades and across several academic disciplines have cumulatively established the vague notion that he had a profound influence on political thought in Canada.

This chapter begins by describing how the Burkean claim featured in the work of leading conservative historians and opinion-makers in the post-war period. They were not the only scholars to invoke Burke's name, but they were the central and most influential group in this story because they invoked Burke in a similar way for a shared purpose. A variation on the "Tory Touch" thesis, the Burkean claim was part of their campaign against what they perceived to be Canada's dangerous twentieth-century drift towards continentalism, liberalism, and other baleful American influences.¹ The contemporary debate over these issues will be examined in more

¹ It will be seen that an overlap exists between what I deem the original generation (progenitors of the Burkean claim) and the generation that followed them. S.F. Wise and Kenneth McNaught were still writing about Burke in the 1980s and 1990s, when a younger generation had also taken up this theme. Generationally, however, they belong to the group who began writing about Burke

depth in the final chapter of the dissertation; the objective here is first to put on record how the claim was made.

The closing section of the chapter examines the legacy of the Burkean claim by tracing how it has been repeated in scholarship on Canadian politics since the 1980s. The format is similar to the first section of this chapter. In chronological order, approximately a half-dozen examples are discussed that connect Burke with the Fathers of Confederation or with enduring features of Canadian political culture. It becomes evident that the more recent claims about Burke are reiterations of the earlier claims. The chapter concludes that there is a need to investigate the historical record for actual evidence of a Burkean influence, a conclusion that, it is noted, is supported by experts in Canadian political science and intellectual history who have commented on this phenomenon.

Burke in Post-War Canadian Historical Writing

When the notion of a critical Burke influence began is hard to pin down. The first reference in print to it to be identified in this research was a 1933 article by McGill University historian T.W.L. MacDermot that associated Burke with John A. Macdonald.² It was just a passing reference in which no specific connection was made between Burke and Macdonald. MacDermot was discussing the pragmatism of the British political tradition, and Burke may have come to mind in that connection (as he often did for scholars of British politics).³

Identifying when the notion became prominent is easier. It featured in the work of

in the 1950s.

² T.W.L. MacDermot, "The Political Ideas of John A. Macdonald," *Canadian Historical Review* 14, no. 3 (1933): 247-64.

³ This connection will be elaborated in Chapter 3.

leading English-Canadian historians and public intellectuals writing between the end of the Second World War and the nation's Centennial. The bulk of the claims were made by a group of scholars who were uneasy about the extended reign of the Liberal Party and, what they saw as related, the fading importance of the British heritage in national identity.⁴ They were conservatives who were attached to features of the British tradition they had grown up with in Canada. Born between the end of the Victorian period (1901) and the start, in the 1920s, of three decades of liberal hegemony in politics and academia, they had become distressed by the reorientation of the country away from the Britishness of its past and toward the United States.⁵ Their primary concern was that the disappearance of Canada's British features, particularly its intellectual and cultural traditions, was undermining its distinctive character. This group included leading English-Canadian historians Donald Creighton, William L. Morton and Roger Graham, as well as the philosopher George Grant, and public intellectual John Farthing.⁶

The most prominent Burkanadian was University of Toronto historian Donald Creighton, whose biography of Sir John A. Macdonald remains a classic work on Canada's first prime

⁴ This group is discussed in Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing: 1900-1970*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1976).

⁵ See Lawrence Leduc et al., "A New Liberal Dynasty: The Mackenzie King Era," chap. 3 in *Dynasties and Interludes: Past and Present in Canadian Electoral Politics*, (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2010), 107-65. In federal politics, 1921 was the start of a Liberal Party dynasty that lasted until 1957 when a rebranded, Progressive Conservative Party led by John Diefenbaker finally ended the Liberal reign begun under Mackenzie King and continued by Louis St. Laurent. The Liberals pursued closer economic integration with the U.S., a process that began to accelerate during World War Two. Liberals also shed important symbolic ties to Britain, discontinuing, for example, the use of "Dominion" on public documents and rebranding the Royal Mail as Canada Post. See C.P. Champion, *The Strange Demise of British Canada: The Liberals and Canadian Nationalism, 1964-1968*, (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 29-30.

⁶ Berger, *Writing of Canadian History*, 229. Farthing, the only member of this group who was not extensively-published, was a firm believer in the British Crown and Westminster Parliamentary model. His posthumously-published work, *Freedom Wears a Crown*, remains an oft-cited defense of these institutions. See John Farthing, *Freedom Wears a Crown*, ed. Judith Robinson, (Toronto: Kingswood House, 1957).

minister. In two volumes, *The Young Politician* (1952) and *The Old Chieftain* (1955), Creighton's *Sir John A. Macdonald* was an unapologetically celebratory ode to the prime minister's deft handling of Confederation and American expansionism.⁷ Macdonald was cast as a hero for preventing the absorption of British North America into the United States and therefore preserving for future generations the institutions and freedoms provided under the British Crown.

Creighton often alluded to Burke in his writing on Macdonald. In *The Young Politician* (1952), for example, when relating the content of a Macdonald speech in which the politician had expressed a widely-shared reticence towards meddling with private ownership laws, Creighton singled out Burke as the principle source of Macdonald's view. Specifically, Macdonald had said that any serious change in the established law of private property contributed to the subversion of social and political order. It was a commonly held view that the basis of civilized society inhered in the fundamental right to protection of property, and that property reform risked disorder. Yet although Macdonald had also appealed in the same address to "the great names of English history," Creighton specified just one of those names, writing that the speech was "full of echoes of Burke."⁸

Creighton's claim that Macdonald had an affinity for Burke often rested on sparse evidence. There was a touch of the old eighteenth-century manner in John A.'s occasional Latin citations, Creighton claimed, in his not infrequent quotations from satiric or comic literary classics such as *Hudibras*, and in his appeals to the great traditions of Chatham, Pitt, and Burke.⁹ Creighton also repeatedly commented that Macdonald seemed to belong more appropriately to the eras of George III (1760-1820) and George IV (1820-1830), than to the Victorian period. He

⁷ Donald Creighton, *John A. Macdonald*, (Toronto: MacMillan, 1952-1955). 2 Vols.

⁸ Creighton, *Young Politician*, 107.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 179.

claimed that Governor-General Lord Dufferin had also expressed that opinion.¹⁰ Creighton consistently affiliated Macdonald with Burke.

The University of Manitoba historian W.L. Morton advanced the Burkean claim more strongly and unequivocally than Creighton. In *The Canadian Identity* (1961), Morton declared that Burke, along with Bishop Bossuet and Jeremy Bentham, had been one of Canada's spiritual forefathers.¹¹ Morton made this claim in the context of a larger argument about Canada's distinctiveness from its European progenitors and its southern neighbour. The philosophical spirit at the heart of Canadian political culture had differed from the former thanks to the influence of North American geography, and from the latter owing to a refusal among Canadians to break with their past.

Importantly, Canadians had not abandoned the British monarchy. For French Canadians, pre-conditioned by France's *Ancien Régime*, monarchical institutions had provided the continuity of a governing structure based on hierarchy and rank that allowed them linguistic and religious freedom. For English Canadians, many of whom descended from the Loyalists, monarchy had always been the embodiment of the law and the guarantor of individual liberty. Retaining that institution guaranteed the continued authority and legitimacy of the state. Here was a core political legacy passed from one generation to the next, in what was, Morton claimed, a "Burkean partnership of the generations."¹²

George Grant's *Lament for a Nation* (1965) considered the philosophical differences that historically had distinguished Canadian from American society. His lament was that they had by

¹⁰ Creighton, *Old Chieftain*, 251.

¹¹ Morton, *The Canadian Identity*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961), 86. He contrasted them with the spiritual forefathers of the United States, who he said were John Calvin, Robert Browne, and John Locke.

¹² *Ibid.*, 111.

the 1960s almost entirely disappeared because of the advance into Canada of technological progress and liberalism that he characterized as American. Canada, Grant said, had its basis in a conservative mission to build an ordered, stable society in North America that resisted the libertarian impulses of the United States. Shared by Loyalists and British officials, Anglicans as well as Presbyterians, this conservatism was the social doctrine that public order and tradition, in contrast to freedom and the “emancipation of the passions,” were central to the good life. This was a British conservatism that Grant argued had been best articulated in the writings of Burke.¹³

University of Saskatchewan historian Roger Graham’s contribution to this literature was his three-volume biography of Arthur Meighen.¹⁴ In contrast to his rival and the more electorally successful Liberal leader, Mackenzie King, who (in Graham’s portrayal) obfuscated, delayed, and deceived his way to multiple majority governments, Meighen was a man of principle who idealized political life and believed in presenting voters with clear positions on policy.¹⁵ Rather than prioritizing winning and retaining power, Meighen believed that the principle responsibility of a political leader was to take a broad view of the national interest and then put that view plainly to the electorate. Graham claimed that in this regard Meighen reflected the influence of Edmund Burke’s principled views about the role of the parliamentarian.¹⁶ In this formulation,

¹³ Grant, *Lament for a Nation*, 68.

¹⁴ Roger Graham, *Arthur Meighen: A Biography*, 3 vols., (Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1960-65).

¹⁵ Among Mackenzie King’s political talents was a remarkable ability to walk a thin line between opposing policy positions that kept his options open as long as possible. His determination to avoid having the Liberal Party pinned down to concrete positions was regarded as unprincipled by opponents. See, for example, John Herd Thompson, with Allen Seager, “Liberal Opportunism and Progressive Frustration,” chap. 2 in *Canada 1922-1939: Decades of Discord*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985).

¹⁶ Graham, *The Door of Opportunity*, 222. Graham was referring to a famous occasion when Burke had declared to his Bristol electors that he would be their representative, not a mere delegate. In 1780, he had opposed the policy, popular with Bristol merchants, of punitive trade policies with America, and it cost him the Bristol seat. This will be discussed at greater length in the next chapter. Interestingly, Graham had also described Liberal prime minister Sir Wilfrid

then, Meighen's creed was Burke's honourable conservatism, in contrast to the mendacious opportunism of the nefarious Liberals.

The Burkean claim arose in similar ways in the above-cited writings of Creighton, Morton, Grant and Graham. None of them was conducting a research project on the origins and development of Canadian political culture in which Burke's influence had been revealed in the primary sources consulted. Grant's and Morton's volumes were polemics about Canada's identity and destiny largely inspired by contemporary issues, while Creighton and Graham mentioned Burke in passing as a way to ennoble their politician subjects. Each established a context in which a traditional Canada and its virtues were threatened—by Americanization, modernization, libertarianism, or some combination thereof. In this crisis Burke was invoked as a revered font of wisdom about, and symbol of, the British political tradition. Canada, it was implied, would betray this precious British political legacy at its peril.

This was the most common way in which the Burkean claim was made in the immediate postwar period, but it was not the only context in which the name of Burke was invoked. Burke was generally associated with the British tradition of political liberty, which, for all its conservatism, was still a liberal tradition. Thus in 1947, for instance, A.R.M. Lower argued that Canadians owed Burke a debt for the institutions that had secured them liberty and justice.

Lower was tracing the growth in Canada of individual rights and freedoms as embodied in

Laurier in Burkean terms. William Pitt the Elder, later ennobled the Earl of Chatham, had famously declared that politics was about "measures, not men," by which he meant that less attention should be paid to the character of the politician than to the measure he supported; good personal character was unnecessary (See, for example, Stanley Edward Ayling, *The Elder Pitt, Earl of Chatham*, (London: Collins, 1976), and Jeremy Black, *Pitt the Elder*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992)). Graham described Laurier as "a master of men rather than of measures" (Graham, *Door of Opportunity*, 50). This suggested that he associated the sins of modern liberalism with Mackenzie King in the era of his leadership after the death of Sir Wilfrid Laurier in 1919.

successive incarnations of its constitutions, from the earliest in New France to the BNA Act. The latter, of course, differed from the British Constitution in that it had been written down, but the spirit of each was the same insofar as they all strove to balance individual freedom and social order, to find a way to safeguard the rights of the individual while legislating for the greater good. According to Lower, few working in the Westminster tradition of parliamentary government that was Canada's inheritance had done more to define the appropriate balance than Burke. Lower called him one of the two "giants" in that tradition (John Milton was the other).¹⁷ Unlike the Burkanadians, however, Lower did not brandish Burke's name as a sacred totem that could protect Canada's traditional British character.

The rise of Canadian nationalism and growth of universities in the postwar period made the 1960s and 1970s peak decades in the publishing of scholarly Canadian political history scholarship. During this period intellectual historian S.F. Wise wrote a series of articles on the political culture of Upper Canada (later published in a collection entitled *God's Peculiar Peoples* in 1993). Unlike the Burkanadians who preceded him, Wise's work was based on primary research targeted on the very phenomenon to which the Burkean claim related. It mentioned Burke's name only in connection with his "philippics against the French Revolution" which Wise judged to have been one of a handful of factors influential in confirming biases in favour of the British political system in the formative years of Upper Canada.¹⁸ Burke's ideas were part of the intellectual stock of the Loyalists and British-born officials who established the colony in the 1790s. Yet Wise was cautious about making too much of this or any other intellectual legacy. "It

¹⁷ A.R.M. Lower, "Two Ways of Life: The Spirit of Our Institutions," *Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association*, (May 1947): 399.

¹⁸ S.F. Wise, *God's Peculiar Peoples: Essays on Political Culture in Nineteenth-Century Canada*, (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1993), 48, 169.

can be shown,” he conceded,

that the commonplaces of political or social language by which British American Tories of the early nineteenth century justified their actions to themselves stem directly from such European luminaries, or their popularizers, as Burke, De Lolme, Montesquieu, and Blackstone.

However, these ideas did not, in his opinion, survive unadulterated with causal force in their new environment. To understand a political culture the intellectual historian had to study the unique constellation of local conditions that shaped it and how they changed over time.¹⁹ Thus Burke’s name did not figure at all in Wise’s analyses of Upper Canadian political ideas over the subsequent century.

This is not to say that there have not been occasions when historians have reported a strong Burkean influence in the historical record. In the mid-1970s, Carl Berger discussed Burke’s influence on Thomas D’Arcy McGee. Berger noted, for example, how McGee’s Catholic conservatism had been reinforced by the principles of Burke, and how McGee’s criticism of the United States for its excessive democratization earlier in the nineteenth century was motivated by a Burkean fear of the potential tyranny of majorities. Burke’s influence in this instance has been confirmed by McGee’s recent biographer, David Wilson. Indeed, McGee, as noted earlier, explicitly stated that he consciously moulded himself and his political beliefs in Burke’s image.²⁰ Burke’s influence on McGee stands out amidst all the other claims for Burkean influence on Canadian political culture by virtue of the convincing evidence of it in the historical record.²¹

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

²⁰ Carl Berger, *The Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 155-156; David A. Wilson, *Thomas D’Arcy McGee*, vol. 1., (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008), 7, 12, 43, 97, 99, 121, 167, 181, 192.

²¹ Berger also noted an instance in 1911 in which Conservative prime minister Robert Borden cited “the Burkean principle that a nation is a continuous partnership between the dead, the

The Burkanadians' claim, in contrast, was a free-floating assertion, unencumbered by any solid grounding in the historical record. They had popularized the idea that there was something distinct about Canada, something that was tied up in the British and conservative traditions it had inherited, and encapsulated this something with the term "Burkean". Their ranks included some of the most respected and accomplished Canadian historians of their time, yet from the start there were good reasons to be sceptical of their use of Burke. For one, many of their assertions rested on a shaky methodological foundation. Few, if any, references to primary source materials were provided. Where were the transcripts, for example, of legislative debates marked with repeated citations from Burke's tracts or speeches?²² Second, these historians did not even demonstrate an accurate or complete understanding of Burke's political philosophy. Instead, they ennobled vague political or cultural notions generally associated with Burke. Third, in keeping with their "take my word for it" approach, they made no effort to sketch out for the reader (as is done below in the third chapter) how the ideas of an eighteenth-century statesman might have been transmitted intact over significant distances of time and place, to influence nineteenth-century, British North American colonial politicians. Wise had concerns in this regard, but they were not wise.

Finally, this group had an ongoing investment in certain conceptions of the nation that

living, and generations unborn," but this was a passing reference on a trivial matter akin to that cited by Underhill in his research on Canada First. These kinds of Burkean references were literary aphorisms rather than evidence of a comprehensive political ideology being operationalized (Berger, *Sense of Power*, 197-98). When fine sentiments were required for solemn public occasions, the name of Burke often fit the bill. Another example of this kind of use of Burke occurred in 1991 at the annual graveside tribute held to mark the John A. Macdonald's birthday at which historian Kenneth McNaught waxed eloquent about the conservative tradition by invoking the statesman's legacy (Kenneth McNaught, "Sir John A. Macdonald and the Idea of Canada," *Historic Kingston*, no. 39 (1991): 11).

²² Rainer Knopff, Preface to "Confederation and Individual Liberty," by Janet Ajzenstat, in *Canada's Founding Ideas*, (Macdonald-Laurier Institute), Nov. 2010, 6-7.

they had helped to popularize, and they were never reticent to step in to defend these ideas whenever seriously threatened by critics.²³ The post-war invocation of Burke, then, is best understood as a variation on the “Tory Touch” thesis. Though not entirely new, it suddenly proliferated in print, attaining a new prominence in English Canadian conservative nationalist mythology.

The Meme – 1980s to Present Day

Donald Creighton passed away in 1979. W.L. Morton died a year later. If the Burkean claim had died with them, it might have remained a historical curiosity. However, a new generation of scholars picked up the thread in the early 1980s. It has since retained a powerful allure in both critical discussions and popular narratives of early Canadian politics. This section discusses noteworthy examples of the Burkean assertion in Canadian scholarship over the past thirty to forty years in order to demonstrate its longevity and continued relevance not only across academic disciplines but outside of academia as well.

Political scientist Rod Preece, who had studied and written about the Tory tradition in Canada, was among the second wave of those convinced of Burke’s central importance to Macdonald.²⁴ He published an article in the *Canadian Journal of Political Science* in 1984 that offered a modern re-statement of the Burkean claim. Preece identified what he said were striking

²³ Historian Paul Romney explained how Creighton, “alarmed by the resurgence of controversy about the compact theory” of Confederation, once gave a talk in which he defended as the truth his centralist thesis and accused the compact theorists of abusing history to weaken the federation (Paul Romney, *Getting It Wrong: How Canadians Forgot Their Past and Imperilled Confederation*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 7).

²⁴ Preece had engaged in the debate with Gad Horowitz and others about the phenomenon of “Red Toryism” in Canada. See Rod Preece, “The Myth of the Red Tory,” *Canadian Journal of Social and Political Theory* 1, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 1977): 3-28.

parallels between elements of the former's political philosophy and the prime minister's politics, observing, for example, that Macdonald had shared Burke's belief that "economics must be subservient to politics."²⁵ He also argued that what Macdonald's detractors had characterized as ideological inconsistency was rather a considered, pragmatic approach to political questions that accorded "with Burke's doctrine of circumstance."²⁶ Continued comparisons such as these led to the resounding conclusion that it was "appropriate to regard Macdonald as the statesman embodiment of the principles of Burkean philosophy."²⁷

Unlike most others, Preece at least attempted to qualify his argument. For one, he acknowledged that doubtless other thinkers had shaped Macdonald's thinking. Preece also said that he was not necessarily claiming "the direct influence of Burke's writings [on Macdonald], though they were certainly not negligible," nor was he suggesting "that the origins of the Canadian constitution are to be discovered in some Burkean blueprint."²⁸ Yet the qualifications seemed half-hearted because his article continually reaffirmed that "the disposition displayed by the most influential Canadian of the Victorian era, whose role in the founding of the Canadian polity was without parallel, is exemplified most fully in the writings of Edmund Burke."²⁹ That said it all.

In 1988, another political scientist, John Conway, argued that Ontario's Progressive Conservative provincial governments represented a traditional conservatism that was best

²⁵ Rod Preece, "The Political Wisdom of Sir John A. Macdonald," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 17, no. 3 (1984): 484.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 463.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 486.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 464.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

expressed by Burke.³⁰ According to Conway, the legislative programs of Ontario premiers Leslie Frost, John Robarts, and William Davis had expressed in practice a set of political values derived from the political philosophy of modern British conservatism.³¹ Those values had been memorably articulated by Edmund Burke. Thus, conservatives in Canada were Burke's heirs. Like Burke, they too believed that society was a partnership between the living, the dead, and the yet-unborn, and so each generation had a responsibility to the others. That explained why it was Conservative governments that had enacted four decades of social welfare legislation as well as environmental protections for future generations.³²

In 1997, Confederation historian Christopher Moore claimed that Canada's mid-1800s politicians, liberal and conservative, were "all Burkeans" with regard to the role of Parliament and parliamentarians.³³ The politicians of that era "frequently spoke in Burkean tones of Parliament's independence, and of a legislator's obligation to consider the national good" in addition to the interests of his constituents.³⁴ Prince Edward Island's Edward Whelan had been typical. Though he preferred not to mention Burke by name, Whelan would paraphrase him, and "expressed and acted on a philosophy of government" best exemplified and articulated by

³⁰ John Conway, "An 'Adapted Organic Tradition,'" *Daedalus* 117, no. 4 (Fall 1988): 381. The period between 1943 and 1986 was marked by the uninterrupted one-party rule of Ontario by the Progressive Conservatives.

³¹ The years of their premierships were, respectively, Frost (1949-1961), Robarts (1961-1971), and Davis (1971-1985).

³² *Ibid.*, 382. One of the protections Conway specifically cited was the "Air Quality Agreement" which prime minister Brian Mulroney's federal Conservative government pursued with the United States in the 1980s. Known during the negotiations as the "Acid Rain Treaty," the agreement was signed to reduce emissions of the air pollutants that had resulted in acid rain and depletion of the Ozone Layer.

³³ Christopher Moore, *1867: How the Fathers Made a Deal*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1997), 76.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 78-79.

Burke.³⁵ According to Moore, Whelan brought Burke with him to the Quebec Conference (he had been unable to attend at Charlottetown).

But Burke's influence extended further than just Whelan. It was felt in all of the deliberations at Quebec City that October, such that the full measure of the Conference could not have been taken "without measuring Burke's shadow on it."³⁶ Moore contended that Burke's constitutional ideas found embodiment in the preamble to the BNA Act, where it was stated that the new constitution should be similar in principle to that of the United Kingdom. To Moore that clause amounted to an endorsement of Burke's constitutional ideas and all they entailed.³⁷

In the late 1990s a small group of conservative-leaning political scientists and public intellectuals, based in Toronto and led in part by Janet Ajzenstat, began work on a project to compile a critical edition of the Confederation debates from the separate colonial parliaments in British North America. When contributor William Gairdner wrote to the Donner Canadian Foundation on behalf of that project (which eventually became *Canada's Founding Debates*), he told them that they would see Burke, among a handful of others, as a consistent presence in the statements of colonial politicians. Gairdner claimed that scholars who knew how to "tease out the spirits" of great thinkers would find Burke haunting these pages.³⁸

The second wave of Burkean claims continued into the twenty-first century. In 2006, University of Toronto law professor and political scientist David Schneiderman found Burkean principles in the institutional origins of the modern Canadian state.³⁹ Schneiderman was

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁸ William D. Gairdner, quoted in Janet Ajzenstat, et al., eds., Introduction to *Canada's Founding Debates*, (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, 1999), 9.

³⁹ David Schneiderman, "Edmund Burke, John Whyte, and Themes in Canadian Constitutional Culture," *Queen's Law Journal*, no. 31 (2006): 578-97.

examining the place of Burke's thought in Canada's constitutional culture in response to the work of John Whyte, a fellow constitutional scholar.⁴⁰ Whyte, "Canada's foremost theorist of the liberal foundations of Canada's constitutional order," insisted that ideas, practices, and vocabularies "derived from liberal principles" were "embedded within Canada's constitution."⁴¹

Schneiderman argued that the liberal principles and ideas upon which, Whyte had insisted, Canada's constitutional order were based, had probably derived from Burke's constitutional thought. In particular, the "liberal, pluralist and anti-imperialist" aspects of Burke's thinking, Schneiderman wrote, joined nicely "with aspects of Canadian constitutionalism at its origins."⁴² Schneiderman insisted that Burke's ideas had, for example, helped to guide British policy on Quebec when foundational decisions were being made that would determine the constitutional course of British North America.⁴³ Colonial policy, beginning about the time of the Quebec Act, 1791, and continuing well into the nineteenth century, "ended up largely consistent with some of Burke's expressed sentiments" on previous British policies in India and America.⁴⁴ Specifically, such sentiments included the need to fit policies to the unique and complex social and political environments of each colony. For British North Americans, that meant a freer hand to evolve its own constitutional principles.⁴⁵

Journalist Richard Gwyn, in his two-volume biography of Sir John A. Macdonald, reproduced Rod Preece's claims about the Burkean influence on Macdonald (i.e. that Macdonald

⁴⁰ See John D. Whyte, "Legality and Legitimacy: The Problem of Judicial Review of Legislation," *Queen's Law Journal* 12, no.1 (1987): 1-20.

⁴¹ Schneiderman, "Edmund Burke, John Whyte, and Themes in Canadian Constitutional Culture," 580.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 582.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ This stood in contrast to the experience of the American colonies who had been governed too rigidly by Britain.

embodied Burkean prudence and pragmatism). It was, in fact, Gwyn's apparent uncritical acceptance of Preece's own compelling but unsubstantiated claims that provided the original inspiration for this dissertation. Here was yet another declaration that Burke had been a significant influence on Macdonald and Canadian politics, tendered again with an apparent confidence that it would be accepted on faith.

More recently, in his work on the history of the idea of liberty in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Canada, Michel Ducharme invoked the pivotal influence of Burke (as well as Locke and Montesquieu) in the development of Canada's constitutionalist tradition. That tradition, Ducharme claimed, "underpinned by modern liberty . . . constitutes the organizing principle of Canada's intellectual and political history."⁴⁶ Moreover, that tradition fostered an order that now "forms the basis for the modern Canadian state."⁴⁷

In 2017, national op-eds inspired by Canada's sesquicentennial celebrations again raised the special importance of Burkean ideas and principles to the political character of Canadians and their government institutions. In the *National Post*, Walter Newell made the traditional "evolution vs. revolution" case that Canadians had enjoyed a steadier, if less glamorous, advance than Americans toward democracy and freedom, and singled out Burke's ideas as an important inspiration for that evolution. In the *Financial Post*, Philip Cross argued that Burke's emphasis on the preservation and conservation of the existing state of things had informed the special importance Canadian conservatives had typically attached to environmental conservation.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Michele Ducharme, *The Idea of Liberty in Canada During the Age of Atlantic Revolutions, 1776-1838*, trans. Peter Feldstein, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 186.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* Ducharme also singled out the importance of Burke to reformer and Patriote Denis-Benjamin Viger (1774-1861). Ducharme identified Viger as a "Burkean conservative," citing, for example, Viger's belief in "prescription as the basis of any good constitution" (*Ibid.*, 221, n.2).

⁴⁸ Richard Gwyn, *The Man Who Made Us*, (Toronto: Vintage, 2008), 295-96; Walter R. Newell, "Canada's Principled Founding," *The National Post*, February 17, 2017, A11; Philip Cross,

Beyond these examples, it is worth mentioning that this work is not the first to consider undertaking an investigation of Burke's historical influence in Canada. As stated above in the Introduction, McMaster University's Janet Ajzenstat contemplated such a project in the 1990s, but instead chose to research the influence of John Locke since the latter's ideas were more readily demonstrable in parliamentary debates and in the constitution.⁴⁹ Historians of Canadian intellectual culture and politics, including Carleton University's A.B. McKillop and the University of Toronto's David Wilson, have stated that the presence of Burke in so many Canadian political histories suggested that more systematic investigation of original documents was needed in order to properly assess Burke's impact in Canada.⁵⁰

At a time when many cherished Canadian national myths have long ago been thoroughly debunked, the strange afterlife of the Burkean claim stands out. Perhaps it has escaped critical attention because, scholars assumed that, having disposed of the "Tory Touch" mythology, they had dispatched the ghost of Burke as well. Instead, it seems to have escaped academic quarantine, infecting middlebrow media where it has continued to induce a low-grade nationalist fever with delusionary side-effects. This is perhaps not terribly surprising. As I have suggested, it originated in nationalist rhetoric rather than from the archive.

This dissertation now turns to the task of bringing clarity to the question of the Burkean

"How Elizabeth May taught conservatives never to trust green activists," *The Financial Post*, April 19, 2017, Accessed June 10, 2017, <http://business.financialpost.com/fp-comment/philip-cross-how-elizabeth-may-taught-conservatives-never-to-trust-green-activists>.

⁴⁹ Janet Ajzenstat, *The Canadian Founding: John Locke and Parliament*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007).

⁵⁰ A.B. McKillop, email message to Matthew Cain, August 17, 2013. McKillop, an *emeritus* professor at Carleton University, is an expert on Canadian intellectual history. His email stated that it was "about time" a scholar "worked systematically on Burke's influence in Canada." I had a similar discussion with Professor Wilson when I met him at an academic conference. David Wilson, in discussion with the author, Charlottetown, PEI, 26 September 2014.

origins of Canadian political culture. Chapters Three and Four present the results of a thorough investigation of Macdonald's life and his papers in search of the influence of Burke. First, however, it is necessary to develop an accurate understanding of what it would mean to be Burkean. Thus, in the next chapter this study turns to an examination of the life and political thought of Edmund Burke.

CHAPTER TWO: A BURKEAN “TEST”

Introduction

The first task in testing the historical accuracy of the claim about Burke is to identify the central concepts of his political philosophy. This chapter attends to that task in three parts. The first part is a short analytical biography of Edmund Burke. It provides the basis for a plausible case that he could have influenced Macdonald by explaining how he came to be regarded as one of the most sophisticated and important political thinkers of his time and how his ideas remained powerful in the century after his death.¹ Biographical details are largely omitted in favour of focusing on Burke’s ideas and their impact.² To allow for a more thorough comparison with Macdonald, however, details about Burke’s political motivations and his rhetorical strategies are included.

The second part of the chapter situates Burke’s thought within the British political tradition by reviewing how others have classified his work. It discusses the fundamental ideological cleavage of eighteenth-century British politics and Burke’s relationship to it.³ On the

¹Nineteenth-century historian Henry Buckle wrote that Burke was “one of the greatest men, and, Bacon alone excepted, the greatest thinker, who has ever devoted himself to the practice of English politics” (see Henry Buckle, *History of Civilization in England*, 2nd London ed., Vol. I, (London: D. Appleton and Co., 1920), 326). United States President Woodrow Wilson said of Burke he was “the foremost political thinker in Europe” (see Woodrow Wilson, “Edmund Burke and the French Revolution,” *The Century Magazine* 62, New Series no. 12 (September 1901): 784).

²There are several excellent biographies of Burke, many of which I use in this dissertation. Two of the most thorough are Carl Cone, *Burke and the Nature of Politics*, 2 Vols., (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1957-64), and F.P. Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 2 Vols., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998-2006).

³ It is important to acknowledge that my discussion of Burke and British politics focuses on opinion within the narrower set of society that composed the governing and political classes. Outside of those circles, Burke was often more contentious. Indeed, he was generally reviled by the plebeian masses and their spokesmen. John Thelwall (1764-1834), for example, “the chief

one hand, there were Court Whigs, and on the other, Country Whigs. By mid-century, the Court Whigs had prevailed in the successive ministries of Robert Walpole (1721-42) and Henry Pelham (1743-54) and had established a governing consensus. Born in 1727, Burke came of age in those years, at a time when the nation appeared stable and prosperous, and he accepted as natural, indeed preferable, the political and social order of that time. Thus, even though he occasionally sided with Country Whigs on important matters of policy, he was regarded as a Court Whig as defined by the mid-century standard. This explained, for instance, Burke's visceral opposition to King George III's attempts to seize back executive control in the 1760s-70s after his predecessor, George II, had largely deferred to his ministers.⁴

Ultimately, however, such categorizations were inadequate since Burke was unique, his own brand of Whig.⁵ His body of thought was complex because it was situational, assigning different priorities in different circumstances. It was also highly-nuanced in a way that left many contemporary observers unable to follow his logic. Burke's maxim that the goal of reform should be conservation, for example, was to many a paradox, not sound policy. Thus, critics (and even allies), unable to comprehend, often accused him of inconsistency and hypocrisy.

orator, strategist, and theoretician of the largest radical organization" of the 1790s – the London Corresponding Society – thoroughly criticized Burke as a self-serving manipulator of people and events (Gregory Claeys, Introduction to *The Politics of English Jacobinism: Writings of John Thelwall*, by John Thelwall, ed. Gregory Claeys, (University Park, P.A.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 55). Working-class historian E.P. Thompson has documented the responses to Burke from outside eighteenth-century polite society, noting how “popular pamphleteers performed satirical variations upon Burke's” two-word epithet for the masses – “the swinish multitude” – by titles such as “*Hog's Wash, Pig's Meat,*” and “*Address to the Hon. Edmund Burke from the Swinish Multitude (1793)*” (E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, (London: V. Gollanz, 1963), 90).

⁴ See Andrew C. Thompson, *George II: King and Elector*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011).

⁵ Historian Alfred Cobban said, “there is only one school of politics for which Burke can legitimately be claimed, and that is the school of Burke.” See Alfred Cobban, *Edmund Burke and the Revolt Against the Eighteenth Century*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1929), 39.

The second half of the chapter then moves on to discuss what happened to Burke's "meaning" after his death in 1797. Once he passed out of living memory, successive iterations of Burke, often contradictory, prevailed from one generation to the next. At one point he was celebrated as a utilitarian liberal. Later he was lauded as the founder of modern conservatism. Each iteration built on its predecessor. For example, the prudence and pragmatism utilitarians admired in him would later be extolled by conservatives. The fluctuation of understandings of Burke's thought over time must be kept in mind when analyzing how his ideas may have been interpreted first by Macdonald and then by the Burkanadians.

Part two also shows how many of the ideas associated with Burke were commonplace in nineteenth-century political discourse, complicating the task of distinguishing his particular ideas from the broader tradition to which they belonged. Burke's reputation led to his universal applicability. Liberals and conservatives, indeed politicians and thinkers of all persuasions, selectively deployed his phrases to impress opponents and buttress their arguments. Yet, most who quoted from Burke did so out of context. The original circumstances in which he had advanced his ideas were ignored or forgotten. Under these circumstances his thought became little more than an assortment of quotable aphorisms with which to embroider rhetorical forays.

Part three develops a test for detecting Burkean ideas. Under three broad headings, Burke's major ideas are explained point-by-point, revealing, for example, his preferred approach to reform and his beliefs about the appropriate function of the elected representative. The test provides a method by which the influence of Burke's ideas upon Macdonald can be assessed. The identification of certain ideas as hallmarks of Burke's thought is based on the words of Burke himself and a wide variety of secondary studies of him.

Before proceeding, a word about the sources is germane. Most of the biographical and

secondary work on Burke that appeared in the nineteenth century was written by amateur historians who did not assess him critically. Biographer Sir James Prior, for example, had been an Irish surgeon. He openly admired his fellow Irishman, and plainly stated an intention to celebrate Burke's life and career. John Morley was a Liberal journalist and politician who wanted to further the Liberalism of Cobden and Bright. His two books on Burke uncritically celebrated his progressive and reforming credentials while ignoring or dismissing his reactionary tendencies.

Therefore, I have tried to rely primarily on more rigorous assessments of Burke by scholars from the twentieth century, when the rise of professional history raised standards of objectivity, balance and proof. Among Burke's biographers, Carl Cone, Conor Cruise O'Brien, and F.P. Lock all studied his life extensively and relatively dispassionately. American conservatives Russell Kirk and Peter J. Stanlis had presentist reasons for celebrating Burke, yet these historians too were university scholars committed to the standards of their profession.⁶

Edmund Burke – Biography

Edmund Burke was born in Ireland in 1727 to a middle-class Protestant father and a Catholic mother. Ireland at that time was ruled by a small Protestant elite empowered by the British parliament, and Catholics suffered from the spiteful and punitive Penal Laws.⁷ Motivated by bigotry and designed to compel conversion to Protestantism, these laws prohibited Catholics

⁶ I rely on Stanlis's edited collection of Burke's writings and speeches for direct quotations from Burke. Almost all references in this section to Burke's speeches and writings are taken from Edmund Burke, *The Best of Burke: Selected Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, (Washington: Regnery Publishing, 1963).

⁷ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography of Edmund Burke*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 271.

from voting, holding office, and inheriting land, among other things.⁸ Though Burke was raised in the Church of England, half of his family was Catholic, and this would always make him suspect in some English quarters.⁹ Burke's speaking voice – an Irish brogue – reinforced his status as an outsider and sometimes made him the object of mockery.¹⁰ His middle-class origins also meant that he never entirely gained acceptance by peers in the aristocratic social circles in which he moved as a statesman.

Burke's background had two effects. First, exposure to the ugliness of intolerance (of which he and his mother's family were victims) and abuses of unchecked power provided the principal wellspring of his political career. He would always be motivated, first and foremost, by hatred of arrogant, arbitrary power and its corollary, moral injustice. Winston Churchill said that Burke's soul "revolted against tyranny, whether it appeared in the aspect of a domineering Monarch and a corrupt Court . . . or towered up against him in the dictation of a brutal mob and wicked sect."¹¹ The need to counter and reduce such loci of irresponsible power was "the great and direct inducement, beyond all question . . . in all the chief actions of his life, public and private."¹² From resisting George III's autocratic tendencies, to opposing mob rule in France,

⁸ For example, see Karen Stanbridge, *Toleration and State Institutions: British Policy Toward Catholics in Eighteenth-Century Ireland and Québec*, (Lanham, MD.: Lexington Books, 2003), and Maureen Wall, *The Penal Laws, 1691-1760*, (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 1967).

⁹ Sir James Prior, *Memoir of the Life and Character of the Rt.-Hon. Edmund Burke*, (New York: Franklin, 1968), 1:193. The press and Burke's political opponents regularly cast doubt on his loyalty by pointing to his mother's religion, even suggesting he was secretly a practicing Catholic. His political career almost ended before it even began because a jealous colleague had spread such rumours.

¹⁰ Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 2:117.

¹¹ Winston Churchill, "Consistency in Politics," in *Thoughts and Adventures*, (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1932), 40; see also Russell Kirk, *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered*, (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1967), 129.

¹² Prior, *Life of Burke*, 1:466.

Burke's career was a life-long crusade against tyrannical power.¹³

Second, it meant that Burke had to rely on his intellectual gifts alone for advancement. He first attracted notice among intellectual elites for his eloquent and sophisticated writing on philosophical, literary, and historical subjects. A prodigious writer, he published within a few years *A Vindication of Natural Society* (1756), the *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), *An Account of the European Settlements in America* (1757), and *An Essay Towards An Abridgement of the English History* (1760).¹⁴ By 1760 he was a well-respected commodity in the London literary world. More important, he was on intimate terms with Samuel Johnson and the other leading artists together with whom he later formed the legendary "Literary Club."¹⁵

The connections developed from his literary career gave him access to political operators who were impressed by his talents. One, William Gerard Hamilton, provided Burke his first opportunity in politics. In 1760 the young and prominent Hamilton was a Member of Parliament and the chief secretary to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. Hamilton hired Burke as his personal secretary to assist him with research and writing. The job did not last, but it introduced Burke to more important politicians. In July 1765, he was chosen by the new Prime Minister, the Marquis of Rockingham, to serve as his private secretary. By January 1766 Burke had obtained a seat in

¹³ O'Brien, *Great Melody*, 405.

¹⁴ Edmund Burke, "A Vindication of Natural Society," in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 47-75; Edmund Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, (London: Dodsley, 1757); Edmund Burke, *An Account of the European Settlements in America*, (London: Dodsley, 1757); Edmund Burke, *An Essay Towards an Abridgement of the English History*, (London: Dodsley, 1760).

¹⁵ Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 1:204. Dates are not exact, but Lock estimates that Burke must have known them since at least 1758. The "Club" was a London dining club that began meeting weekly in 1764 to discuss and debate philosophical, literary, and political subjects. Founding members included Burke, Johnson, and the artist Joshua Reynolds. See James Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, (London: 1791).

the House of Commons, where Johnson said he “gained more reputation than any man at his first appearance had ever gained before.”¹⁶

Burke’s breadth of knowledge and rhetorical repertoire were unrivalled in a parliamentary peer group that included some of the best educated men in Britain. He had a gift for memorable metaphors. The state, for example, he often referred to in nautical terms i.e. “the ship of state,” “trimming the ship,” and “casting their bower-anchor in the House of Lords.”¹⁷ More famous, however, was his metaphor for the state as an edifice, as when he compared the pre-revolutionary French Constitution to a “noble and venerable castle.”¹⁸

He also frequently used scriptural phraseology. In one of his most memorable interventions in the Commons, Burke directed attention to the prime minister, Lord North (who had fallen asleep) by saying “brother Lazarus is not dead, but sleepeth.”¹⁹ Since Burke had amateur interests in budding sciences like plant genetics and chemistry, he borrowed phrases from those disciplines too. In the *Reflections*, he likened the “spirit of liberty in action” to the escape of wild gas.²⁰ The language of physics, astronomy, medicine, cookery, and the theatre all regularly appeared in his speeches and writings.²¹ He often used clothing as a metaphor to define the individual, such as when he contrasted the “coat of prejudice” with “naked reason,” and commended the “decent drapery” drawn from “the wardrobe of a moral imagination.”²²

Two of his favourite rhetorical devices were hyperbole and argument from remote

¹⁶ Samuel Johnson, in a letter to Langton, quoted in John Morley, *Burke*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1879), 30.

¹⁷ Prior, *Life of Burke*, 2:449.

¹⁸ Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 530.

¹⁹ Prior, *Life of Burke*, 2:449-50.

²⁰ Burke, *Reflections*, in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 515.

²¹ Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 2:512.

²² Burke, quoted in Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 2:329.

consequences. In a speech of April 29, 1771, opposing divorce, he used both strategies. Burke was among the most unbending defenders of a system which almost entirely prohibited divorce. To defend that system he turned first to hyperbole, arguing that any liberalization of the law, however minor, threatened the very foundation of all social order and thus of civilization itself. The argument from remote consequences claimed that unless the rules governing divorce were tightened it would lead to more divorces on increasingly trivial grounds.²³

That speech demonstrated another of Burke's rhetorical trademarks, generalization of argument. He preferred an appeal to general principles rather than to narrow legal precedents.²⁴ In *Observations on a Late State of the Nation* (1769), Burke argued that while George Grenville and William Knox were skilled in the "little tricks of finance," and the "little arts of great statesmen," they were oblivious "of their ancient customs, their opinions, their circumstances, or their affections."²⁵ Burke also sometimes constructed fictitious polarities to make his own position appear judiciously balanced.²⁶

For two decades, Burke was "the brains of the Rockingham party."²⁷ Contemporary observers like Lord Buckinghamshire remarked that Burke was not only Rockingham's right hand, but both his hands.²⁸ In fact, until his death in 1782, the Marquis was only ever the

²³ Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 1:308. I am unfamiliar with the "argument from remote consequences" as a standard rhetorical strategy and did not find that terminology used in other Burke scholarship. It appears to be a shorthand that Lock himself invented to explain Burke's tendency to predict the direst of consequences for bad policy. "Taken to a logical extreme" may be an equivalent.

²⁴ Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 1:220-21.

²⁵ Edmund Burke, *Observations on a Late State of the Nation*, (London: Dodsley, 1769), 19, 49, 51.

²⁶ Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 1:149.

²⁷ Cone, *Burke and the Nature of Politics*, 1:74.

²⁸ D.A. Winstanley, *Personal and Party Government: A Chapter in the Political History of the Early Years of the Reign of George III, 1760-1766*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910), 243, n.2.

nominal leader of his own party. Like most aristocrats of the time, he had entered politics out of a traditional obligation to public service.²⁹ He did not begrudge having more able thinkers determine party policy. While Burke was often at odds with the haughtier aristocrats in the coalition, he was effectively its nominal leader's intellectual mentor and he consequently had great influence on party policy.³⁰

Indeed, it was Burke who first articulated the comprehensive set of principles that came to define the party. To this day *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (1770) “remains the classic statement of the principles of the Rockingham party.”³¹ Later, when Burke argued for a conciliatory approach to the rebellious American colonies, the Rockinghams, despite significant internal disagreement, made conciliation their policy.³² Likewise, when they briefly returned to power in 1782, their signature reforms aimed at ending government largesse and inefficiency were pushed for and implemented by Burke.

In the greatest crusades of his career – exposing the crimes of the British East India Company in a drawn-out prosecution of Warren Hastings, and checking the spread of revolutionary fever from France – Burke dominated the business of the House of Commons and public discourse like no other. To impeach Hastings, the former Governor-General of Bengal, required years of tireless investigation and argument to convince ambivalent colleagues on his side of the aisle (for whom there was no more unpromising topic) as well as William Pitt's unfriendly Tory government.³³ Burke was sustained by “invincible zeal, perseverance, and

²⁹ See Ross J.S. Hoffman, *The Marquis: A Study of Lord Rockingham, 1730-1782*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1973).

³⁰ Cone, *Burke and the Nature of Politics*, 1:73.

³¹ Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 1:274. Many others have (more or less) said the same thing. See, for instance, O'Brien, *Great Melody*, xxxvi.

³² O'Brien, *Great Melody*, 150.

³³ *Ibid.*, 336.

genius.”³⁴ His success in convincing the House to start impeachment proceedings was remarkable because by the 1780s impeachment was seen as “obsolescent, if not quite obsolete” (the last having occurred in 1746).³⁵ Having persuaded colleagues of Hastings’s guilt, Burke was appointed the manager for the case when it moved to the House of Lords. He was at the forefront of British politics.³⁶

The need to have others see things his way was characteristic of Burke. In adolescence, he had written to a friend that “it is against my Nature to see people in an opinion I think wrong without endeavouring to undeceive ‘em.”³⁷ It was also characteristic for him to attempt this through the sheer force of his will. Once committed to a cause, like the punishment of Hastings, Burke could be ruthless, imposing his will on others.³⁸ In such cases, his speeches in the House of Commons were notable for strength rather than dignity. They were overpowering rather than elegant. Sometimes this meant sinking to the use of a “vulgar tongue” and “ill-chosen epithets.”³⁹

Burke’s passions often appeared to others as hysterics. In December 1792, he resorted to what even friends and allies thought an unnecessary “theatrical pantomimic trick...unworthy of a great orator.”⁴⁰ The incident was inspired by his dismay that not only was Parliament not taking seriously his warnings that French revolutionaries were trying to incite a similar mass revolt in Britain, but it was actually considering a peace agreement with the French. To convince them otherwise, Burke claimed he had reliable information that France’s new government had ordered

³⁴ Prior, *Life of Burke*, 2:395.

³⁵ Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 2:65.

³⁶ See P.J. Marshall, *The Impeachment of Warren Hastings*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), and Philip Lawson, *The East India Company: A History*, (New York: Longman Group, 1993).

³⁷ Edmund Burke, to a Friend, 1745, quoted in Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 1:43.

³⁸ O’Brien, *Great Melody*, 316.

³⁹ Prior, *Life of Burke*, 2:448.

⁴⁰ Prior, *Life of Burke*, 2:188.

3,000 daggers from a domestic manufacturer for distribution to eager British rebels, and then, in a legendary performance, he produced one of the daggers, exclaiming as he threw it to the floor “this is what you are to gain by an alliance with France.”⁴¹

That scene was in keeping with Burke’s tendency to let his emotions overtake his reason. Heated by the animated atmosphere of the House of Commons, he often gave “greater rein to his feelings and to the natural bent of his mind, which was certainly not towards moderation.”⁴² He could be too rough, browbeating others with fiery rhetoric, as he admitted to Richard Shackleton, a friend from youth: “It is but too well known that I debate with great Vehemence and asperity and with little management either of the opinions or persons of many of my adversaries.”⁴³ Sometimes, especially as he grew older, “his political resentments fuelled his emotional convictions.”⁴⁴

Burke’s reputation and influence diminished in the last years of the 1780s but were revived by the publication of *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), which was immediately recognized as a historic contribution to political thought.⁴⁵ It was read by the educated classes throughout Europe, and earned him praise from its most powerful monarchs, including George III (the long-time target of Burke’s antagonism).⁴⁶ *Reflections* positioned Burke as Europe’s leading counter-revolutionary, and debate coalesced around what he had

⁴¹ Burke, quoted in Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 2:439.

⁴² Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 2:441.

⁴³ Burke, quoted in Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 2:268. Burke was “a persistent and stubborn opponent” when engaged in parliamentary debate. See also Lock, *Burke*, 1:220.

⁴⁴ J.G.A. Pocock, Introduction to *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, by Edmund Burke, ed. J.G.A. Pocock, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), xxiii.

⁴⁵ Peter Burke, *Public and Domestic Life of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke*, (London: Ingram, Cooke and Co., 1853), 241.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* Empress Catherine II, also known as Catherine the Great, of Russia and the Emperor of Germany each wrote Burke expressing appreciation for his defense of monarchy.

written – within six months there were already twenty-eight published responses.⁴⁷ As political scientist (and future U.S. President) Woodrow Wilson observed a century later, “statesmen of every opinion” were seeking Burke’s advice because he alone appeared to have correctly diagnosed the situation in France.⁴⁸

Ironically, Burke’s newfound general popularity left him without a political party. The group of Whigs he belonged to for decades had, under new leader Charles James Fox, lately moved too far in the direction of reform for his taste. While Burke abhorred the early violence in France, Fox and most Whigs saw it as a temporary and minor incident on the way to lasting progressive reforms. Indeed, they hoped it would spur popular interest in reform at home. By 1792, Burke’s continued denunciations and uncompromising opposition to anything resembling French-styled parliamentary reforms forced a break with his party. Yet he could hardly sit across the aisle with Pitt’s Tories, since he still had fundamental disagreements with them on many matters of policy.

Arguably, however, Burke’s independence from the trappings of party allegiance may have strengthened his credibility with Pitt’s cabinet.⁴⁹ Indeed, they retained him as an adviser after he resigned from Parliament in 1794, putting him in the inner circle of Britain’s most trusted and accomplished leaders. His continued lobbying for an aggressive stance toward the French was effective. He did the most of any thinker to ensure that the government and the

⁴⁷ Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 2:343. In fact, as Claeys noted, in the increasingly heated political atmosphere that accompanied the aftermath of the publication of *Reflections*, “every other topic of debate was suspended” (Claeys, Introduction to *The Politics of English Jacobinism*, 17). While many published responses were positive, there were also, on the reform side, a number of notable critical replies, such as Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and Thomas Paine’s *The Rights of Man* (1792), that challenged Burke’s depictions of events in France and his characterizations of English reformers like the Reverend Richard Price.

⁴⁸ Wilson, “Edmund Burke and the French Revolution,” 788.

⁴⁹ Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 2:375.

public in Britain would remain opposed to the French Revolution and to the Enlightenment principles which had set it in motion.

Burke's political opponents believed that his opposition to events in France was a betrayal of his principles. After all, he had consistently sympathized with the American colonists from the time he entered Parliament in 1765, when the controversial Stamp Act was poisoning relations between America and Britain, and though he did not support revolutionary violence and the Declaration of Independence, he understood what motivated them.⁵⁰

Yet as Burke explained when he moved for conciliation with the colonies in 1775, the American desire for freedom and self-government was in keeping with the spirit and tradition of Britain's Glorious Revolution settlement of 1688. The Americans were the "descendants of Englishmen . . . not only devoted to liberty, but to liberty according to English ideas and on English principles."⁵¹ The Glorious Revolution had been about restoring a just social balance, not overturning the entire social order.⁵²

That contrasted with the French Revolution, which *was* about overturning the social order. What's more, the latter insisted on shaping a new social order to fit abstract theories of liberty and justice. Burke had repeatedly criticized British policy for insisting on its right, in principle, to govern America as it wished, without accommodating its unique geographic,

⁵⁰ See Edmund S. Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution*, (New York: Collier Books, 1963), and also Peter D.G. Thomas, *British Politics and the Stamp Act Crisis: The First Phase of the American Revolution, 1763–1767*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). Intended to help the British government pay for troops stationed there (and for the debt accumulated during the Seven Years' War), the Stamp Act imposed a tax on the American colonies and required that only papers with embossed revenue stamps produced in London be used in the colonies for printed materials. It was immediately unpopular with colonists and was a formative event in the American agitation for independence.

⁵¹ Burke, "Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies," in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 189.

⁵² Cone, *Burke and the Nature of Politics*, 2:315.

economic, and political circumstances. In that case, the British approach to America had been strikingly similar to the thinking of the French revolutionaries. Rather than governing according to circumstance, Britain's rulers had tried to govern "according to our own imaginations . . . to abstract ideas of right" which was "no better than arrant trifling."⁵³

Critics failed to see the distinction. They accused Burke of trying to curry favour with George III to obtain a rewarding sinecure. Richard Brinsley Sheridan's biographer echoed many radical Whigs when he said that Burke's opposition to the French Revolution contradicted the spirit of all he had said previously.⁵⁴ After a career spent opposing corruption and authoritarianism in George III's puppet ministries, how could Burke not support the overthrow of the tyrannical French monarchy unless he did so out of self-interest?

On the contrary, Burke had repeatedly demonstrated that his integrity was unimpeachable. He maintained a fidelity to his principles that was "astonishing in the eighteenth century."⁵⁵ George III would have given him a government office at any time, but Burke consistently refused in order not to compromise his beliefs.⁵⁶ Later, when the Rockingham Whigs returned to power in 1782 and Burke was made Paymaster of the Forces, he implemented new restrictions that prevented him from enriching himself as previous Paymasters had done, despite the fact that he had lived in constant fear of debtors' prison.⁵⁷ Burke also stood on principle at the expense of friends and colleagues.⁵⁸ Even on his deathbed he refused to receive

⁵³ Burke, "Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies," in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 184.

⁵⁴ Thomas Moore, quoted in *Selections*, 21. See also Thomas Moore, *Memoirs of the Life of the Right Honourable Richard Brinsley Sheridan*, (London: Longmans, 1825).

⁵⁵ Kirk, *Genius Reconsidered*, 95.

⁵⁶ O'Brien, *Great Melody*, 218.

⁵⁷ Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 1:222; see also Kirk, *Genius Reconsidered*, 95. Prior to Burke's reforms, Paymasters could lend out at interest for private profit, in addition to other perquisites which Burke eliminated or curtailed.

⁵⁸ Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 2:583.

Fox because he feared it would send the wrong message i.e. that he had reneged on his opposition to the Foxite view of the French Revolution.⁵⁹

That Burke was among the most highly-regarded intellects of his age is borne out by testimony from contemporaries. Samuel Johnson's opinion of Burke is perhaps the most reliable, since he spent years in conversation with Burke and because Johnson (who famously had a high opinion of himself) was loath to praise others. Yet even Johnson, probably the most formidable literary mind of his time, was convinced of Burke's intellectual superiority. Thus, he would submit to contradiction from Burke when he would not tolerate it from others.⁶⁰ Johnson exclaimed that Burke was the "first man in the House of Commons" because he "was always the first man everywhere," by which he meant that, whatever the field, Burke was always the most knowledgeable and talented.⁶¹

Other great minds were similarly impressed. American thinker, inventor, and founding father Benjamin Franklin, who spent much of the 1760s and 1770s in London and corresponded with Burke, wrote of his "great and invariable respect and affection" for him as an intellect and a statesman.⁶² British author and literary critic William Hazlitt believed Burke had been "the brightest luminary of his age."⁶³ Even William Hastings, whom Burke had prosecuted, and the King had conceded Burke's genius.⁶⁴ As Lock observed, "how many political writers have been

⁵⁹ O'Brien, *Great Melody*, 588-89.

⁶⁰ Prior, *Life of Burke*, 1:118.

⁶¹ Morley, *Burke*, 107. Johnson admired Burke's encyclopedic knowledge of all subjects and his ability to draw on that knowledge quickly in conversation.

⁶² Prior, *Life of Burke*, 1:393.

⁶³ William Hazlitt, "On the Character of Burke," in *Selections*, by Edmund Burke, ed. A.M.D. Hughes, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), 2-3.

⁶⁴ Thomas Copeland, "Johnson and Burke," in *Statesmen, Scholars, and Merchants*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 303. Though George III developed some affection for Burke once the latter's emphasis shifted to defending the monarchy, the King had always acknowledged his talents.

compared, not by a friend but in the invective of an abusive opponent, to Shakespeare and Aristotle” as Burke was by William Augustus Miles?⁶⁵

It was the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, however, that permanently cemented Burke’s reputation as a brilliant political observer and thinker. Since it was published at a time (November 1790) when events in France appeared to be unfolding peacefully, most early reviews were centred on the power of Burke’s rhetorical skill. Far more than a treatise on one event, however, it contained timeless truths about the art of governing, making powerful arguments from custom and tradition that could be used in many other contexts.

Yet it only became his signature contribution to political philosophy after events in France demonstrated his prescience. Sir Walter Scott reflected decades later that only Burke had seen how the supposed “superior legislation of the French” was “all gibberish,” and how their delegitimization of authority would lead to anarchy and dictatorship.⁶⁶ Conor Cruise O’Brien’s story about teaching the *Reflections* in the 1960s is revealing. Since the horrors (regicide, purges, social breakdown) so aptly described in *Reflections* mirrored real events, O’Brien’s students had assumed that Burke was documenting what had already happened; they were stunned that he was predicting the course of events to follow.⁶⁷ Today, the *Reflections* continues to rank among the important works of political philosophy.⁶⁸

After the Revolution descended into the Terror, Burke persuaded like-minded Whigs to break with Foxites and join him in supporting Pitt’s government (which had begun taking steps,

⁶⁵ Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 2:531.

⁶⁶ Sir Walter Scott to Henry Francis Scott the Younger, January, 1831, in J.G. Lockhart, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, Bart.*, Vol. X, (Edinburgh: Robert Cadell, 1848), 32.

⁶⁷ O’Brien, *Great Melody*, 403.

⁶⁸ Kirk, *Genius Reconsidered*, 153. Kirk wrote that “it is unequalled in any language’s literature of politics” (*Ibid.*).

on Burke's advice, to prevent the spread of revolutionary fever to Britain). Thus, a new Tory-Whig coalition was founded on the basis of preventing parliamentary reformers and "Jacobin agitators" from forming a government.⁶⁹ Burke's influence in the new working coalition was not limited only to policy on France. His voice was critical in moving the government into extreme measures like prosecutions for seditious libel and suspending habeas corpus.⁷⁰

Fears about reform and revolution lingered until 1830, so the coalition in some form or another governed Britain for more than three decades after Burke's death. He had been critical in setting the philosophical course for this coalition, and its policies were informed by, among other things, his interpretation of the Revolution Settlement of 1688, his preference for a state Church, and his warnings about parliamentary reform.⁷¹ "Burkeism," twentieth-century historian and politician Arthur Baumann wrote, was "an energetic living faith [that] flourished for thirty years" because "it reflected the inner consciousness of England."⁷²

Admirers made sure he would never become irrelevant. So, although the world he had written about had, by the 1830s, faded from living memory, he remained influential because new generations of trend-setting thinkers and politicians venerated him. Burke's principled stands and high-minded approach to policy earned him regular praise for maintaining the highest standard of statesmanship. In 1852 the London *Times* editorialized that "politics, when he dealt with them,

⁶⁹ Arthur A. Baumann, *Edmund Burke, the Founder of Conservatism*, (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1929), 63.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁷¹ J.C.D. Clark, Introduction to *Reflections on the Revolution in France: A Critical Edition*, by Edmund Burke, ed. J.C.D. Clark, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 109. Clark says that Burke "provided or confirmed" the theoretical underpinnings for the ministries of William Pitt, Henry Addington, the Duke of Portland, Spencer Perceval, the Earl of Liverpool, George Canning, Viscount Goderich, and the Duke of Wellington. That succession of ministries lasted until 1830. See also Prior, *Life of Burke*, 2:440-41.

⁷² Baumann, *Founder of Conservatism*, 40.

assumed a grandeur which they had never known before, for he raised them above the exigencies of his own fleeting day, to apply them to the instruction and the wants of future ages.”⁷³

Historian William Lecky echoed these sentiments, claiming Burke’s lessons were timeless.⁷⁴

Karl Marx, who had no particular affinity with Burke’s views on revolution, recognized Burke’s importance in British intellectual and political circles, commenting that Burke was “the man who is held by every party in England as the paragon of British statesmen.”⁷⁵

Eminent French historian and political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote *Democracy in America* (1838), an important analysis of American society and government, was an admirer as well, especially of what Burke had said about the dangers of democracy and equalitarianism.⁷⁶ Tocqueville repeated Burke’s warnings. One of Britain’s leading liberal thinkers, and the century’s foremost historical authority on Burke, John Morley, said that when combined, Burke’s *Speech on American Taxation* (1774), *Speech on Conciliation with America* (1775), and the *Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol* (1777) composed “the most perfect manual . . . in any literature, for one who approaches the study of public affairs.”⁷⁷

Liberals like Morley, including constitutional expert Walter Bagehot and prime minister William Gladstone, agreed with most of the political ideas and principles in the Burkean corpus.

⁷³ From the *London Times*, April 9, 1852, quoted in Peter Burke, *Public and Domestic Life of Burke*, 314.

⁷⁴ See Ross Hoffman and Dave Levack, Introduction to *Burke’s Politics: Selected Writings and Speeches on Reform, Revolution, and War*, by Edmund Burke, ed. Ross Hoffman and Dave Levack, (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1949), xi. Lecky wrote “the time will never come in which men would not grow wiser by reading him.”

⁷⁵ Karl Marx, leading article in the *New York Daily Tribune*, No. 4597, 12 January 1856, quoted in O’Brien, *Great Melody*, xxxii.

⁷⁶ Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve, (New York: G. Dearborn & Co., 1838). See also Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*, 6th ed. (Chicago: Regnery, 1978), 178-79, and David Bromwich, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 9.

⁷⁷ Morley, *Burke*, 78.

In retrospect it may seem strange, but in fact Burke was often more important in the nineteenth century to liberals than to conservatives.⁷⁸ The former celebrated Burke's conciliatory stance toward rebellious American colonists and his belief in lifting legal restrictions on Irish Catholics. Most important, they agreed with him that the protection of private property was the fundamental basis of liberty and civil society.

Gladstone had read everything of Burke, both his speeches and published writings, and believed that of the five great questions the latter had taken up he had been wrong only on the French Revolution.⁷⁹ There is no question that Gladstone was influenced by the former Whig, changing his mind on the Irish question, for example, after reading Burke. Parliamentary debates show that Gladstone employed Burkean arguments as well.⁸⁰ He even appeared to have modelled his view of the ideal statesman on Burke (not surprising, given the latter's universal acclaim at that time).⁸¹

Burke's ideas exerted a strong influence on British conservatives as well. Indeed, the Conservative Party adopted him as their patron saint.⁸² Perhaps the most important conservative

⁷⁸ Clark, Introduction to *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 109; see also Kirk, *Conservative Mind*, 162.

⁷⁹ Kirk, *Conservative Mind*, 162; see also John Morley, *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone*, 3 Vols., (London: Macmillan and Company, 1905-1907).

⁸⁰ O'Brien, *Great Melody*, xxxiii. In preparing for the Home Rule debates in the 1880s, Gladstone read Burke constantly and took copious notes.

⁸¹ Bromwich, *Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke*, 21; see also L.T. Hobhouse, *Liberalism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964). Bromwich points to the correlation between L.T. Hobhouse's summation of Gladstone's view and Burke's view. Again, as I pointed out earlier in this chapter (see above), the reverence for Burke, while nearly universal in the political classes, was not shared by the democratic popular classes. Burke was reviled in the 1790s by radicals such as John Thelwall and Mary Wollstonecraft and the plebeian masses outside of polite culture. In the nineteenth century, the radical Jacobin critiques of Burke were taken up by the working classes, who also loathed Burke.

⁸² Clark, Introduction to *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 109. Again, testimony to how Burke meant whatever his proponents needed him to mean. Consider that he had always been a Whig (albeit one without a proper home after the French Revolution) and that the Conservative

in the second half of the nineteenth century, prime minister Benjamin Disraeli, was widely regarded in his day as the natural heir to the Burkean tradition. It was not a coincidence that when Disraeli was granted a peerage, he was ennobled the Earl of Beaconsfield; that was originally to have been Burke's title before the death of his only son made his peerage impossible. Other personal and policy similarities pointed to a connection. Baumann pointed out that just as Burke had tutored aristocrats like Rockingham, Disraeli educated the "Tory squires" in his own party.⁸³ Baumann also asserted that Disraeli revived Burke's colonial policy.⁸⁴ Lord Hugh Cecil believed, as did many of Disraeli's peers, that the prime minister had been "spiritually one" with Burke.⁸⁵

When Disraeli's party introduced the Reform Bill in 1867 to increase the franchise, they were acting in accordance with Burkean wisdom.⁸⁶ Though Disraeli was not yet technically the prime minister (Lord Derby was the titular head of the ministry), he was the recognized party leader and the driving force behind the passage of the bill that granted more citizens the vote before demand became too strong to resist. This was "the specific counsel of Burke," who argued that reform is most effective when conferred as a gift, not extracted as a concession from

Party would not exist until roughly four decades after his death. Further, he had not identified himself as a "conservative" even if he had sometimes emphasised the need to "conserve" some traditions and institutions.

⁸³ Baumann, *Founder of Conservatism*, 9.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁸⁵ Cobban, *Edmund Burke and the Revolt Against the Eighteenth Century*, 38.

⁸⁶ See F.B. Smith, *The Making of the Second Reform Bill*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), and also Maurice Cowling, *1867: Disraeli, Gladstone, and Revolution: The Passing of the Second Reform Bill*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967). The Second Reform Act, 1867, further enlarged the franchise, doubling the number of males who could vote. The Liberal Party's agenda had long included democratic and electoral reforms but they had failed to make significant headway when in government. When the Conservative Party displaced the Liberals as the party of government in 1866, Disraeli saw the passage of reform as an opportunity to win over the newly-enfranchised voters, who would, presumably, be grateful.

a recalcitrant government.⁸⁷ Like Burke, he had been skeptical of tinkering with the British Constitution yet knew that an overwhelming majority of citizens could not be excluded from political participation.

Fitting Burke into the British Political Tradition

An important caveat must be made before any discussion of Burke's political thought. He was not a conventional theoretician but rather a politician who theorized in response to a situation.⁸⁸ Different circumstances engendered different priorities and, therefore, different theorizations. Thus, unlike other vaunted names in whose company he is often included, such as Adam Smith (1723-1790) or John Locke (1632-1704), Burke did not have one or two authoritative works of systematized insights we may consult for a definitive list of principles.⁸⁹ He must be read carefully in the context to which he is responding. Otherwise, his body of thought would appear to be a hypocritical mess of inconsistencies.

Eighteenth and nineteenth century politics in Britain, the United States, and Canada was principally animated by some form of a debate between the Court and Country varieties of

⁸⁷ Kirk, *Conservative Mind*, 167.

⁸⁸ Discussing Burke as well as Thomas Paine, Thompson argued that "neither writer was systematic enough to rank as a major political theorist. Both were publicists of genius, both are less remarkable for what they say than for the *tone* in which it is said" (Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, 90).

⁸⁹ Adam Smith was a Scottish economist and moral philosopher best known for his inquiry into the nature and causes of national wealth creation. See Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776). He was also a contemporary and friend of Burke's. Englishman John Locke was one of the most influential philosophers of the Enlightenment, and his thought has contributed significantly to the development of political systems throughout the west, especially in the United States. Important works include *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, (London: 1690), and *Two Treatises of Government*, (London: 1689).

Whiggism.⁹⁰ The Country Whigs idealized the independent, landed property owner who was virtuous and incorruptible. This was based in a tradition of political thought that dated as far back as Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527).⁹¹ English politician and political philosopher Sir Henry Bolingbroke (1678-1751) was its principle spokesman in the eighteenth century.⁹² Politically liberal, it favoured the democratic branch of the legislature and therefore a government that was close to “the people.”⁹³ Elected representatives who were excluded from the exercise of executive power had a duty to form a strong parliamentary opposition and hold government to account on every action.

Economically, the Country Whigs were conservative. They feared the emergence of a powerful commercial society in which the functions of government and commerce became intertwined and decisions were removed from the people.⁹⁴ Their ideas would form the basis of

⁹⁰ Peter J. Smith, “The Ideological Genesis of Canadian Confederation,” Ph.D. diss., Carleton University, 1983, 12-13, and 180-181. Smith explains how the research of Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, Reed Browning, and J.G.A. Pocock demonstrated that, contrary to received wisdom, John Locke’s political philosophy had not dominated the eighteenth century. Rather, the politics of that time was better understood using the Court-Country framework. See, for example, Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1967); see also Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), and Reed Browning, *Political and Constitutional Ideas of the Court Whigs*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982).

⁹¹ According to J.W. Burrow, for instance, there was a “neo-classical, humanist, Machiavellian strain” in the ideas of the Country Party. See J.W. Burrow, *Whigs and Liberals: Continuity and Change in English Political Thought*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 17. Niccolò Machiavelli was an Italian diplomat, politician, writer, and philosopher in the Renaissance period. He is best known for authoring *The Prince* (1532), which has continued to shape thought on politics and political science since it was first published.

⁹² Sir Henry Bolingbroke outlined the principles of Britain’s eighteenth-century Court Party in works such as *The Patriot King*, (London: 1749). See also Sir Henry Bolingbroke, *Letters on the Spirit of Patriotism: on the Idea of a Patriot King: and on the State of Parties, at the Accession of King George the First*, (London: 1749).

⁹³ At that time the “people” was narrowly defined. It was limited to those with a minimum property qualification.

⁹⁴ Smith, “Ideological Genesis of Canadian Confederation,” 7-9.

Jeffersonian and Jacksonian civic republicanism in the United States. In Britain, their political ideas informed the nineteenth-century Chartism of William Cobbett, and in Canada the virtuous agrarianism of the Clear Grits.⁹⁵

The Court Party was the inverse of the Country faction; it was politically conservative but economically liberal. It feared the trends toward egalitarianism and democracy and therefore opposed attempts to make parliament more representative or responsive to the needs of the masses. A constitutional monarchy that deferred to the advice of its ministry (ideally composed of public-spirited aristocrats and the ablest thinkers) was the best form of government. For one, it prevented mob rule. Two, it was efficient. To the Country opposition, Court Whigs appeared to lust for power in the pursuit of naked self-interest, yet the latter maintained they were using that power in the best interests of the nation.

In economic terms, the Court favoured commercial society and the man of movable wealth. Government patronage was used to support the man of wealth and increase the reach of Empire through commercial growth, as in the example of the aforementioned British East India Company.⁹⁶ Its ideas were notably articulated by Smith and fellow economist and philosopher David Hume (1711-1776). Their ideas would later inform the Tory tradition in Britain and Canada. In the United States, the Court influence could be seen in the *Federalist Papers* (1788), and in the political party of the same name.⁹⁷ Court Whigs praised what was empirically-based

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁹⁶ See Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain*, (Ranikhet, India: Permanent Black, 2008).

⁹⁷ *The Federalist Papers* were a collection of essays authored by American founding fathers Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay. They were written and published in 1787-88 amidst the protracted national discussion surrounding ratification of the United States Constitution. See Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist: A Collection of Essays, Written in Favour of the New Constitution, as Agreed Upon by the Federal Convention, September 17, 1787, in Two Volumes*, (New York: Printed and Sold by J. and A.

and therefore practical, while they disparaged policies that had not demonstrated successful application.⁹⁸

It is difficult to place Burke squarely in either the Country or Court tradition. When Burke defended the Constitution from Crown overreach he often did so with arguments familiar to the Country set.⁹⁹ Fear of the undue influence of the Crown was one of the things that Burke and the Rockingham section of Court Whigs shared with their Country Whig counterparts.¹⁰⁰ Specifically, each regarded as abhorrent the “ability of the executive in the guise of the prime minister to undermine the independence of Parliament” by offering lucrative salaries and sinecures to MPs.¹⁰¹

To limit the Crown’s ability to bribe members of parliament, the Rockingham Whigs developed a programme of reforms that would eliminate many “useless offices” in the Crown’s household for which MPs were paid but in reality had no responsibilities.¹⁰² The first significant iteration of their plan was put forward by Burke in the House of Commons in 1780.¹⁰³ In 1782,

M’Lean, 1788). Leaders of the Federalist Party included Hamilton, as well as U.S. President John Adams.

⁹⁸ Smith, “Ideological Genesis of Canadian Confederation,” 7-9.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 202-04. Smith says that Burke had also been open to other tenets of the Country Whig creed.

¹⁰⁰ While the principle fault line in eighteenth century British politics was between the Country and the Court, what makes it yet more difficult to keep things straight is that the Court Whigs were themselves divided over important disagreements on tactics and policy. Perhaps the most important cleavage among Court Whigs related to what terms they should accept from George III in order to form government. Named after their leader, the Marquess of Rockingham, the Rockingham Whigs, unlike others on the Court side, consistently refused to take office unless the King agreed to their agenda.

¹⁰¹ Thomas Ertman, “The Great Reform Act of 1832 and British Democratization,” *Comparative Political Studies* 43, no. 8-9 (August 2010): 1003. See also Ian Christie, “Economic Reform and the ‘influence of the crown,’ 1780,” *Cambridge Historical Journal* 12, no. 2 (1956): 144-54.

¹⁰² Ertman, “Great Reform Act,” 1003.

¹⁰³ See Edmund Burke, “Speech on Presenting to the House of Commons (on the 11th February, 1780) A Plan for The Better Security of the Independence of Parliament, and the Economical

when they were briefly returned to office, it was Burke's job, as Paymaster of the Forces, to carry out a leading part of these reforms.¹⁰⁴ He not only eliminated 134 of the useless offices that George III previously had at his disposal, but he also selflessly abolished the ability of the Paymaster to use his post to become wealthy. Such actions were applauded in Country Whig quarters.¹⁰⁵

That said, it is largely accepted that in most respects Burke had been a Court Whig. His aversion to more frequent elections and other parliamentary reforms intended to strengthen democratic participation was telling, as was his belief in a strong centralized government that promoted commerce, and protected liberty by limiting, not expanding, individual freedoms. Like Hume and Smith from whom the English ruling classes borrowed, Burke's image of civil society was dominated by the free market. In that society, a strong state was needed to enforce contracts and property rights.¹⁰⁶

Since Burke was mostly a Court Whig, many of his political ideas were the ruling orthodoxy of his time.¹⁰⁷ For instance, in according primacy to the protection of property rights,

Reformation of the Civil and Other Establishments," in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 341-55.

¹⁰⁴ See Lucy Sutherland and J. Binney, "Henry Fox as Paymaster General of the Forces," *The English Historical Review* 70, no. 275 (1 April, 1955): 229-57. The office of the Paymaster of the Forces was created in 1662 as a permanent position in charge of financing the standing army. The post entailed membership in the Privy Council and because it was largely free of oversight it was often used by the office-holder for personal enrichment. The Paymaster could loan out at interest the money voted by Parliament for military expenditure. This ended when Burke took the post in 1782 and introduced strict regulations.

¹⁰⁵ Warren Elofson, "The Rockingham Whigs and the Country Tradition," *Parliamentary History* 8, no. 1 (1989): 95-96.

¹⁰⁶ Smith, "Ideological Genesis of Canadian Confederation," 201-02.

¹⁰⁷ Clark, Introduction to *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 85; see also Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 1:387. Clark explained that most of the arguments made in *Reflections* in favour of England's social and political order were eighteenth century commonplaces. Lock said that looking to the past (and not theory) for guidance was also common at that time.

“Burke was doing no more than following Locke and the mainstream of eighteenth-century thought.”¹⁰⁸ The belief that social and economic inequalities were part of the providential design was also not new.¹⁰⁹ Burkean thought mostly belonged to the prescriptions of the Whig order that had taken hold of Britain during the reign of George II (1727-1760).¹¹⁰ Burke was almost always writing in the mainstream of English political thought, and his reading of the Revolution in the *Reflections* “was orthodox, not reactionary.”¹¹¹

Because of his situational thought, Burke sometimes appeared to be inconsistent, though he was really only susceptible to this charge after the *Reflections* was published. That famous polemic appeared to contradict most of what he had spent his career saying about corrupt monarchy and aristocratic enablers.

What’s more, as a younger man Burke had been a strong advocate for incremental reform to malfunctioning constitutions. It was hard to square that Burke with the one who later argued that the French nobility had invited revolution because it considered modest reforms and thus opened the door to a thorough questioning of the social order. Did that not contradict Burke’s Whig faith that “limited, restrained, and constitutional revolution was possible, as had been demonstrated in England in 1688?”¹¹² Many on his side of the aisle saw a betrayal of his earlier principles.

Were they correct? Was Burke, in fact, prone to reversing himself? Essayist and Liberal

¹⁰⁸ Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 2:321.

¹⁰⁹ See, for instance, William Paley, *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, (London: 1785).

¹¹⁰ Clark, Introduction to *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 35. According to Clark, from the first Burke had been “a zealous Whig of the reign of George II,” with effusive praise for prime minister Robert Walpole who had ushered in the mid-century Court Whig order. See also Prior, *Life of Burke*, 1:128.

¹¹¹ Pocock, Introduction to *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, xii-xiii.

¹¹² Clark, Introduction to *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 74.

Party politician Augustine Birrell (1850-1933) was adamant that “the same ideas that explode like bombs through his [Burke’s] diatribes against the French Revolution are to be found shining with a mild effulgence in the comparative calm of his earlier writings.”¹¹³ Others said that it only appeared Burke had changed his principles because he was responding to different circumstances and assigning different priorities. Though Burke often shifted emphasis he did not fundamentally change his ground.¹¹⁴ Biographer Carl Cone said that Utilitarians had placed Burke in a false position. They did not see that Burke’s ethical norms were based upon the tradition of natural law and so how his position on the French Revolution was philosophically identical with his positions on other leading issues.¹¹⁵

Other commentators have equivocated. Historian Alfred Cobban was concerned to show that there was no significant change of principles post-1789, yet conceded “it is true that an inconsistency runs right through his thought.”¹¹⁶ According to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Burke had fixed on his values and beliefs by the time of his earliest speeches on America, and they remained consistent to the end, appearing even in posthumously-published writings. Yet Coleridge also observed an interesting lack of congruity in the application of those principles, even sometimes in different passages of the same work. If Burke’s opponents are theorists, for example, “then everything is to be founded on prudence” but if the opponents are “calculators,” then “calculation is represented as a sort of crime.”¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Augustine Birrell, *Obiter Dicta*, Second Series, 188-89.

¹¹⁴ O’Brien, *Great Melody*, 454, 602; see also Bromwich, *Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke*, 8; R.A. Smith, “Burke’s Crusade against the French Revolution: Principles and Prejudices,” in *Edmund Burke: The Enlightenment and the Modern World*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, (Detroit: University of Detroit Press, 1967), 27-44.

¹¹⁵ Cone, *Burke and the Nature of Politics*, 2:510.

¹¹⁶ Cobban, *Edmund Burke and the Revolt Against the Eighteenth Century*, 40.

¹¹⁷ Coleridge, *Selections*, 19.

Experts on Burke have argued that to obtain the fullest understanding one must study the statesman's uniquely-complicated and contested legacy. Historian Walter Love said that the history of interpretations (Burke's "afterlife") was the key to an "ultimate interpretation."¹¹⁸ Studying the primary documents was not enough; the accumulated baggage of "strikingly various versions" of Burke's thought was just as important as his speeches and writings.¹¹⁹ That had been particularly true in the nineteenth century. The fullest expression of his ideas in that century, according to Clark and others, was to be found in historiography, not in theoretical statements.¹²⁰ In other words, the first one hundred years after Burke's death witnessed the greatest variance in terms of how his ideas were interpreted and manipulated.

Until the mid-1830s, Burke was remembered, much as he was in his own time, as a leading defender of the constitutional order established by mid-century, after the administrations of Robert Walpole and Henry Pelham. However, major ecclesiastical and parliamentary reforms, like the First Reform Act, 1832, meant that his positive prescriptions lost much of their direct applicability.¹²¹ The old social and political order was disappearing. Burke's views became "open to reinterpretation and appropriation for use in different contexts."¹²²

¹¹⁸ Walter D. Love, "'Meaning' in the History of Conflicting Interpretations of Burke," in *Edmund Burke: The Enlightenment and the Modern World*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 117-18.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Clark, Introduction to *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 110; see also J.W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 131.

¹²¹ See Ertman, "The Great Reform Act of 1832," 1005-08. Prior to 1832 the situation of the electoral system, for example, was such that a small number of powerful patrons controlled the boroughs which sent hundreds of members to Parliament. That system had long been regarded as corrupt, and there had been many attempts to reform it. The 1832 Reform Act abolished more than a hundred seats in the boroughs, and added seats to the counties, where elections had always been fought more openly. In addition, two new categories of voters were added, which expanded the size of the electorate by 45%.

¹²² Clark, Introduction to *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 109.

From then on, his words would be parsed to fit the partisan motives of liberals and conservatives.¹²³ In some cases, interpreters did not even bother to use Burke's own words; Leslie Stephen's *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth-Century* (1876), for example, popularized the belief that Burke had said society was a living organism without pointing to any evidence that he had actually said this.¹²⁴

By the late 1850s, Utilitarian liberals had repositioned Burke. They argued that expediency had been the essence of his political thought, emphasising early writings in which his watchwords were very often pragmatism and expediency. For years, as tensions mounted between Britain and its American colonies, Burke had repeatedly preached compromise and conciliation to avoid a violent conflict. Even after the Declaration of Independence, he was still arguing pragmatically that it was in Britain's best interests (economically and militarily) to concede defeat. Utilitarians thus elevated expediency as the central theme of Burke's politics, when in fact he had not opposed abstract speculation as such.¹²⁵

In this vein, the historian Henry Buckle also argued that Burke had believed "the aim of the legislator should be, not truth, but expediency."¹²⁶ Thus, regardless of what Burke had also said about the Americans being justified in their complaints, that they were free British citizens

¹²³ Churchill, "Consistency in Politics," 40.

¹²⁴ Love, "'Meaning' in the History of Conflicting Interpretations of Burke," 118; see also Sir Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth-Century*, 2 Vols., (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1876). Though, as I show below, Burke did sometimes use organic or biological terms and imagery. Stephen appeared to have missed or ignored such instances.

¹²⁵ R.A. Smith, "Burke's Crusade Against the French Revolution," 30. Expediency and pragmatism were obvious in the early writings and speeches (as on the conflict with America), and late in his life he was vociferously protesting the theoretical speculations of French and British radicals. But he was never entirely opposed to speculation, only what he considered false speculation based on erroneous premises.

¹²⁶ Buckle, *History of Civilization in England*, 328. Buckle dismissed everything Burke said after the Hastings trial as the product of mental breakdown.

claiming their traditional rights, to Buckle and Utilitarian thinkers, Burke had opposed the taxation of American colonists because it was inexpedient. He had simply “compared the cost with the gain” and reasoned that Britain, even if it was in the right, had more to gain by conciliating the colonies.¹²⁷

Morley was a household name and the nineteenth-century’s historical authority on Burke, so his two histories arguably did the most to popularize the Utilitarian reading of the famous statesman. Thus, by the 1880s, a few years after the publication of Morley’s second treatment of him, admirers and critics alike “supposed he [Burke] was a good English Utilitarian.”¹²⁸ Morley argued that Burke’s political positions were “not conceived by a student in the closet,” but rather always in reference to some practical problem.¹²⁹ Burke’s “great notion of political method” was that circumstances dictated the how and why of political principles.¹³⁰ This version was that of “prudence and pragmatism” which, while the Utilitarian reading eventually faded (see below), would always remain Burkean hallmarks.¹³¹

Interestingly, as the nineteenth century turned over into the twentieth, a popular notion of Burke as an organicist emerged because he had often used organic terms to describe society. Later commentators mistook that to mean he was anticipating modern biological thought.¹³² In the 1920s, C.E. Vaughan said that Burke’s political philosophy was based on the “theory of the State as an organism,” where “the elements of the State, the raw materials on which the

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 333-34.

¹²⁸ Louis I. Bredvold, Introduction to *Edmund Burke: The Enlightenment and the Modern World*, xiii-xviii, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, (Detroit: University of Detroit Press, 1967), xvii.

¹²⁹ John Morley, *Edmund Burke: A Historical Study*, (London: Macmillan, 1867), 29.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹³¹ See, for example, Rod Preece, “The Political Wisdom of Sir John A. Macdonald,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 17, no. 3 (1984): 459-86.

¹³² Bredvold, Introduction to *Edmund Burke: The Enlightenment and the Modern World*, xvii.

statesman has to work, are conceived as natural forces.”¹³³ The organic interpreters reimagined his famous conception of society as a pact among the living, the unborn, and the dead. What he had meant, they said, was that each generation represented separate organs of the body, or the growths of a plant.

Vaughan’s argument was based on a paradox. He acknowledged that Burke mostly avoided the metaphor of the State as an organism, but insisted this was out of necessity, not choice – he had had to hide his true thinking.¹³⁴ Vaughan contemporary F.J.C. Hearnshaw agreed that Burke had conceived of the state organically. In a series of lectures in 1929, Hearnshaw argued that the organic theory was the key to differentiating Burke from other eighteenth-century commentators. However, unlike Vaughan, Hearnshaw argued that Burke had used biological terminology constantly.¹³⁵

Even as his body of thought underwent multiple revisions, Burke had always been celebrated as a brilliant thinker and principled statesman. That changed in the 1930s when Sir Lewis Namier, “possibly the most influential British historian of the twentieth century,” attacked him as a self-serving apologist for a corrupt Whig regime.¹³⁶ The late-eighteenth century became a Namierite preserve after the publication of Namier’s *Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (1929) and *England in the Age of the American Revolution* (1930).¹³⁷ Namier was tearing down the old Whig tradition, and Burke had been its principal contemporary witness. It

¹³³ C.E. Vaughan, *Studies in the History of Political Philosophy: Before and After Rousseau*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1925), 26.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹³⁵ Love, “‘Meaning’ in the History of Conflicting Interpretations of Burke,” 120.

¹³⁶ O’Brien, *Great Melody*, xli.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, xli-xlvi; see Sir Lewis Bernstein Namier, *Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, (London: Macmillan, 1929), and *England in the Age of the American Revolution*, (London: Macmillan, 1930).

did not help that the latter and the tradition he represented were out of sync with the zeitgeist of the cynical and disillusioned post-WWI climate. It was fashionable to denounce Burke because he was a hero to the Victorians and Edwardians who had led the world into the Great War.¹³⁸

However, the damage to Burke's reputation lasted only a few decades. In the United States a Burke revival was already under way by 1950, and a similar rejuvenation took hold in Britain in the late sixties.¹³⁹ Motivated by disillusionment with liberal dogma, there was a "revival of strong interest in Burke" in American historiography of the late 1940s.¹⁴⁰

The revival was the work of conservative thinkers who claimed Burke as the founder of their tradition.¹⁴¹ They were worried about the threat posed to liberal democracy by fascism and communism, each of which promised to boldly remake society by throwing away history and tradition. Russell Kirk said that "conscious conservatism, in the modern sense, did not manifest itself" until the *Reflections* was published and Burke defined, for the first time, the opposing poles of conservation and innovation.¹⁴²

¹³⁸ O'Brien, *Great Melody*, xlii, xlvii.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, xli. It took longer in the latter because of Namier's presence and the influence he had on the historical profession there. For example, Namier's closest associate, John Brooke, used the "signature tune of Namierite scholarship" – damaging asides – about Burke in *The Chatham Administration* (1955), (*Ibid.*, xlix). See John Brooke, *The Chatham Administration, 1766-1768*, (London: Macmillan, 1956). However, there were still dissenting voices during this period. Observing the renewed celebration of Burke, Thompson argued that "Burke's reputation as a political philosopher has been inflated, very much so in recent years" (Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, 90).

¹⁴⁰ Kirk, *Genius Reconsidered*, 16.

¹⁴¹ Even though, as modern historians knew, the terms "conservative" and "liberal" did not exist as political labels in Burke's time. He and his contemporaries would not have thought or spoken in such terms. It should be noted as well that the revival owed something to prominent liberal historians like Lionel Trilling and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. Trilling had expressed doubts about the efficacy of liberal concepts, while Schlesinger, Jr. confessed that Burke had become more satisfying than Thomas Paine, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams, or Thomas Jefferson (*Ibid.*, 17).

¹⁴² Kirk, *Conservative Mind*, 5.

British MP and historian Arthur Baumann believed Burke's dictum about "the Conservation of the antient [*sic*] order of things" was the foundation of all Conservative parties in all countries and all ages.¹⁴³ Cobban suggested that, in founding a new school of political theory, Burke was determined to conserve community, and that even his reforms had been motivated by a desire to preserve rather than to progress.¹⁴⁴ It was the post-1789 Burke, then, the author of the *Reflections* who questioned the Enlightenment – who appealed to conservatives.¹⁴⁵

Evaluating whether Burke was a conservative or not has often had more to do with how conservatism has been defined than with his politics. As the nineteenth century progressed, the forces of popular democracy grew stronger and the political centre shifted leftward. Liberal parties had to distance themselves from Burke because in this new context he appeared to be an opponent of political progress towards enfranchisement and social justice for the masses.¹⁴⁶ By the end of World War I, Burke was admired almost exclusively by conservatives who continued to believe that social order and private property were the guarantors of freedom, and that history (not theory) was the best guide for legislators.

Of course, different interpretations of Burke's political thought said as much about the interpreters as they did about Burke. The problem lay in his universal applicability. Thomas Moore put eloquently what has been a vexing problem for intellectual historians: Burke had "attained in the world of politics what Shakespeare . . . achieved for the world in general."¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Baumann, *Founder of Conservatism*, 47.

¹⁴⁴ Cobban, *Edmund Burke and the Revolt Against the Eighteenth Century*, 97, 58.

¹⁴⁵ John H. Hallowell, *Main Currents in Modern Political Thought*, (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1950), 184-97. Hallowell cited Burke as the most influential spokesman for the conservative reaction to the Enlightenment and grouped him among conservatives and Romantics when discussing the background of modern political thought.

¹⁴⁶ O'Brien, *Great Melody*, 597-98.

¹⁴⁷ Thomas Moore, *Memoirs of Sheridan*, in *Selections*, 21.

That was a “universality of application to all opinions and purposes.”¹⁴⁸ Moore went on:

it would be difficult for any statesmen of any party to find himself placed in any situation for which he could not select some golden sentence from Burke, either to strengthen his position by reasoning, or illustrate and adorn it by fancy.¹⁴⁹

That is precisely what happened, especially in the nineteenth century, when Whigs and Tories, then Liberals and Conservatives, bolstered their arguments with select phrases from the Burkean canon.¹⁵⁰

This led to two problems. First, the meaning of Burke’s writings became detached from their progenitor. The maxims survived and saturated the political lexicon by the mid-nineteenth-century, but most who used them were unaware it was Burke they were borrowing from.¹⁵¹ His thought became just conventional wisdom (i.e. written constitutions were inferior).¹⁵² Morley testified for his contemporaries that many of Burke’s apophthegms “have got imbedded in the current phraseology, and men use Burke’s maxims without knowing who is their teacher.”¹⁵³

Second, since few bothered to read Burke closely, when his aphorisms were used they were untethered from the original context. Many who argued he had been the first conservative were ignorant of the language of anti-revolutionary, pro-establishment discourse on which he drew.¹⁵⁴ The meaning of his prescriptions and other statements became fungible. Politicians

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Cobban, *Edmund Burke and the Revolt Against the Eighteenth Century*, 38. Cobban said that Burke has been all things to all men.

¹⁵¹ Morley, *Edmund Burke: A Historical Study*, 31. Morley said that men used Burke’s maxims without knowing they were borrowing from him; see also Prior, *Life of Burke*, 2:441. Prior said that many of the best speeches in the House of Commons borrowed reasoning and rhetoric from Burke, but again, many were unaware of this borrowing.

¹⁵² Stefan Collini, Donald Winch and John Burrow, *That Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 19-20.

¹⁵³ Morley, *Edmund Burke: A Historical Study*, 31.

¹⁵⁴ Clark, Introduction to *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 110-11.

could twist his words depending on their needs. While a “Burkeian style” came to distinguish English political discourse, it did so as a vague, ungrounded conventional wisdom.¹⁵⁵ By the end of the nineteenth century, he “had become a classic author who was more often quoted than read.”¹⁵⁶ Rather than “a line of communication back to the eighteenth-century Whiggism,” citing Burke became “a way of ignoring it.”¹⁵⁷ He came to stand in “as a summation of everything that might still be worth knowing about eighteenth-century political thought.”¹⁵⁸

This further complicates the task of determining whether those schooled in the British tradition were consciously or unconsciously borrowing from Burke. When William Harkin described Sir John A. Macdonald’s colleague Sir Charles Tupper in 1914 as “a stately and venerable oak which, unaffected by the storms of earlier years, still exhibits a wonderful vitality,” was Harkin exhibiting his indebtedness to Burke, or merely drawing on a common political vocabulary into which Burke had been assimilated long before?¹⁵⁹

Developing the Burkean Test

Clearly, then, the interpretation of Burke’s ideas has a tortured history that demonstrates the difficulty of obtaining an accurate understanding of his meaning. Caution must be exercised, for example, so as not to conflate later distortions of his thought with his original meaning. While this complicates the task of searching for the “real” Burke, it should be possible, with careful attention to Burke’s own words and supplemented by reliable secondary scholarship, to

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁵⁶ Hoffman and Levack, Introduction to *Burke’s Politics*, xi.

¹⁵⁷ Burrow, *Whigs and Liberals*, 14.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ William A. Harkin, “Introductory,” in *Political Reminiscences of the Rt.-Hon. Sir Charles Tupper*, by Sir Charles Tupper, trans. and ed. William A. Harkin, (London: Constable, 1914), 3.. Presumably, Harkin’s point was that Tupper had survived the storms of his political career.

arrive at a reasonable approximation. This section pursues that task in a systematic manner.

For the sake of simplicity and convenience, in the discussion of Burke's ideas that follows below, they are grouped under three broad themes that represent the core of his political thought. These headings represent the three major components of the test that will be applied to ascertain Burke's influence on Macdonald.

The first theme encompasses the Burkean positions on abstract political ideas and experience (or "history") in terms of lawmaking. Under this heading I will discuss his thoughts on reform, including when it was desirable as well as practicable and when it was not. It will also include discussion of two of his most famous maxims, about prescription and prejudice. It is from the ideas under this heading that the Burke of "prudence and pragmatism" emerges.

The second heading has to do with his prescriptions for the form and composition of government. Burke was a staunch defender of the constitutional arrangement that had served since the abdication of James II in 1688. The exercise of power was best left in the hands of a strong central executive composed of a public-spirited aristocracy. Yet it was checked by the limited powers reserved to the monarch and an elected legislature. While the democratic element was necessary, the composition of the electorate was highly restrictive so as to prevent the state being held hostage by the passing whims of the masses. Moreover, elected representatives were not to be mere delegates for their constituents. They should be empowered to act on the basis of the education and experience that had qualified them above others for public service.

The third section groups together what Burke said about individual rights and freedoms in civil society with his ideas about the responsibilities of society to its citizens. The acquisition and protection of private property was a fundamental human right that went hand in hand with liberty and social order. He supported the Church of England as the official state Church, yet he

also believed that greater freedom of religious worship should be tolerated. He believed that criminals were owed a more humane treatment by the justice system and argued for lifting draconian punishments. Finally, although he typically evinced a concern for the general human welfare, he opposed an interventionist state since that would be meddling with the designs of an ultimately benevolent Providence.

Theme I – Aversion to Abstract Speculation

Burke “rejected the *a priori*, abstract, analytical type of reasoning in politics.”¹⁶⁰ He distrusted the mathematical logic and metaphysical speculation of philosophers like René Descartes (1596-1650), John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778).¹⁶¹ In his estimation, they had too often ignored historical realities while assuming idealized human behaviour. Rousseau had theorized that a scientific approach to government could bring about human perfectibility; Burke objected that implementation required destructive rearrangements of a social machinery that at least had prevented anarchy.¹⁶² Against such speculation, Burke countered with history and experience.

This rhetorical battle was a central theme in his writing on the French Revolution where again he argued that revolutionaries were delusional if they believed that a society of perfect

¹⁶⁰ Stanlis, Introduction to *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 20.

¹⁶¹ A mathematician and scientist as well as a philosopher, France’s René Descartes has had a pivotal influence on the development of western philosophy since the seventeenth century. For example, see Stephen Gaukroger, *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s works of political philosophy, particularly *The Social Contract* (1762), are generally credited with providing part of the inspiration for the French Revolution. For example, see Leo Damrosch, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Restless Genius*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2005), and Jonathan Irvine Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

equality could be achieved with neat, rational schemes. In fact, it was a “monstrous act of hubris.”¹⁶³ Equality of condition could not be imposed by decree of the “Rights of Man.” Those who tried (whom Burke called “levellers”) could “only change and pervert the natural order of things.”¹⁶⁴

The aristocracy and monarchy might be purged, but inevitably some class or group of people would be uppermost. Levellers and like-minded thinkers were ignorant or dismissive of the complex, problematical nature of social reality. The radical reordering of society that the Revolution was attempting to effect overnight was doomed to fail, and that failure had, as Burke predicted it would, fatal consequences for France and Europe.¹⁶⁵

Yet Burke did not oppose reform in principle. Indeed, in the *Reflections* he argued that “a state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation.”¹⁶⁶ He even agreed that the French constitution and social order had needed reform. What he objected to in the Revolution was its spirit of innovation, which “is generally the result of a selfish temper and confined views.”¹⁶⁷ Reforms should preserve all the best and lasting qualities in existing institutions. Before it was torn down, the French constitution had served relatively well; while it may have “suffered waste and dilapidation,” yet it had possessed parts “of a noble and venerable castle. You might have repaired those walls; you might have built on those old foundations.”¹⁶⁸ By tearing it all down, the French “had to begin everything anew,” and they lost the hard-earned

¹⁶³ Kirk, *Genius Reconsidered*, 167.

¹⁶⁴ Burke, *Reflections*, in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 540.

¹⁶⁵ Francis Canavan, “Burke as a Reformer,” in *The Relevance of Edmund Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis (New York: P.J. Kenedy, 1964), 105-06.

¹⁶⁶ Burke, *Reflections*, in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 522.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 528.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 530.

lessons of their history.¹⁶⁹

What Burke found especially pernicious about the spirit of innovation was its refusal to make room for human nature. The “good patriot, and a true politician,” he said, “always considers how he shall make the most of the existing materials of his country.”¹⁷⁰ “Politics,” said Burke, “ought to be adjusted, not to human reasonings, but to human nature.”¹⁷¹ We may deplore the immorality of others who succumbed to the worst parts of this nature, by pursuing their own selfish and greedy ends for instance, but we could not transform human beings by remaking society on Enlightenment principles as the metaphysicians tried to do.

Political wisdom took people as they were. Burke wished for all the world that the worst qualities (i.e. selfishness, greed, etc.) could be purged, but hard experience had persuaded him “that government was a practical thing, made for the happiness of mankind, and not to furnish out a spectacle of uniformity to gratify the schemes of visionary politicians.”¹⁷² The only option was to channel these human failings in ways that could benefit the greater good.¹⁷³ Thus, for the “monied men,” he wrote, “there must be some impulse besides publick spirit, to put private interest into motion . . . this desire of accumulation, is a principle without which the means of their service to the state could not exist.”¹⁷⁴ That way, the prosperity of the self-interested would lead to the prosperity of the state.

Burke believed that the Enlightenment had inspired a dangerous hubris among reformers

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 531.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 602. This passage ends with his famous maxim that “a disposition to preserve, and an ability to improve, taken together, would be my standard of a statesman.”

¹⁷¹ Burke, *Observations on ‘The Present State of the Nation,’* quoted in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 122.

¹⁷² Burke, “Letter to the Sheriffs of the City of Bristol,” in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 241.

¹⁷³ Canavan, *Political Economy of Edmund Burke*, 27-28.

¹⁷⁴ Burke, in *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, quoted in Canavan, *Political Economy of Edmund Burke*, 28.

that fooled them into thinking that the changes they sought could be swift and painless. He had always taken a cautious approach to the subject. The British constitution had been “the result of the thoughts of many minds in many ages,” and therefore no simple or superficial thing.¹⁷⁵ Burke repeatedly warned that even those “who truly mean well must be fearful of acting ill” and “rashly meddling” with what they may not fully understand.¹⁷⁶ The most famous iteration of this warning was made in reference to events in France. If only zealous reformers there had heeded his advice that “it is with infinite caution that any man ought to venture upon pulling down an edifice which has answered in any tolerable degree for ages the common purposes of society, or on building it up again without having models and patterns of approved utility” with which to replace it.¹⁷⁷

Moderate change introduced gradually, by insensible degrees, was best because more likely to remain permanent; it also had the advantage of leaving room for further improvement.¹⁷⁸ Moreover, for the reform to garner broad support it could not be enacted through compulsion. If the state had to use its coercive authority to enforce the “improvement,” it would become caught in an endless task of subduing the population. Improvements had to be encouraged through “countenance, favor, privileges,” and other lawful instruments.¹⁷⁹

It was also better to anticipate grievances and initiate reforms prior to public outcry. In 1780, Burke anticipated that discontent from a war-weary nation would be stoked by a weakening economy, leading to popular resentment of government and Crown largesse. His was among the first voices calling to curb expenditures. He reasoned that “early reformatations are

¹⁷⁵ Burke, *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 655.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 656.

¹⁷⁷ Burke, *Reflections*, in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 546.

¹⁷⁸ Burke, “Speech on Economical Reform,” in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 345.

¹⁷⁹ Burke, “Tract on the Popery Laws,” in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 269.

made in cool blood,” while “late reformations are made under a state of inflammation. In that state of things, the people behold in government nothing that is respectable. They see the abuse, and they will see nothing else.”¹⁸⁰

In part, Burke’s disagreement with the bold proclamations being penned in the Revolutionary constitution stemmed from his belief that positive laws were less effective than convention. The health of a constitution and society depended more on convention and practice.¹⁸¹ As early as 1770, he argued “constitute government how you please, infinitely the greater part of it must depend upon the exercise of powers which are left at large to the prudence and uprightness of ministers of state.”¹⁸² “Without them,” he went on, “your commonwealth is no better than a scheme upon paper.”¹⁸³

He based these principles on his extensive study of human history, in which, he said, “a great volume is unrolled for our instruction.”¹⁸⁴ The legislator could find no better guide than the accumulated wisdom of thousands of years of human events. It was long a misconception that Burke opposed a theoretical approach to government. He only rejected abstract speculative theories that were not premised upon experience.¹⁸⁵ Experience was long-successful, practical reason vindicated by time.¹⁸⁶

He did not venerate tradition for tradition’s sake, as his critics claimed. Rather, he valued it because understanding the science of government required more experience beyond one

¹⁸⁰ Burke, “Speech on Economical Reform,” in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 344.

¹⁸¹ Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 1:283.

¹⁸² Burke, *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*, in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 142.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ Burke, *Reflections*, in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 591.

¹⁸⁵ Prior, *Life of Burke*, 1:244.

¹⁸⁶ Clark, Introduction to *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 94-95.

lifetime. An individual might possess a brilliant power of reasoning, but the “higher reason” accumulated by many minds over many ages was unrivalled.¹⁸⁷ Thus, Burke’s maxim that “the individual is foolish, but the species is wise.”¹⁸⁸

A priori reasoning was ineffective and immoral because it had no consideration of context. It was circumstances that gave “every political principle its distinguishing color and discriminating effect. The circumstances are what render every civil and political scheme beneficial or noxious to mankind.”¹⁸⁹ Of course, Burke acknowledged, “abstractedly speaking, government, as well as liberty, is good.”¹⁹⁰ But he did not want to discuss abstract principles. His principle “was always to apply a practical remedy to a practical grievance.”¹⁹¹ Besides, he asked, had the French enjoyed their pre-revolutionary government, because, in the abstract, government was good? Should the criminal be congratulated for escaping prison and regaining his liberty, because liberty was good?¹⁹²

The two most important concepts to emerge out of Burke’s veneration of collected wisdom were prejudice and prescription. The first was not simple bigotry, though at times it may degenerate into that; rather, it was a pre-judgment, an answer in intuition from ancestral consensus, supplying guidance when one lacked the time or intellectual resources to arrive at a decision predicated on pure reason.¹⁹³ Prejudice was “of ready application in the emergency; it previously engages the mind in a steady course of wisdom and virtue, and does not leave the man

¹⁸⁷ Charles Parkin, *The Moral Basis of Burke’s Political Thought*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 118.

¹⁸⁸ Burke, “Speech on the Representation of the Commons,” in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 398.

¹⁸⁹ Burke, *Reflections*, in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 515.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ Peter Burke, *Public and Domestic Life of Edmund Burke*, 55.

¹⁹² Burke, *Reflections*, in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 515.

¹⁹³ Kirk, *Conservative Mind*, 34.

hesitating in the moment of decision.”¹⁹⁴

Prescription provided “the most solid of all titles, not only to property, but, which is to secure that property, to government,” because it favored anything which had long existed and had served reasonably well.¹⁹⁵ The British Constitution, for example, “is a prescriptive constitution; it is a constitution whose sole authority is, that it has existed time out of mind.”¹⁹⁶ Prescription was a social utility that protected the guarantor of civil society, which was private property (more on this below). According to Burke, however property ownership originated, even if, as was frequently the case, it had been through usurpation and conquest, prescriptive rights protected the poor as well as the rich.¹⁹⁷ In part, this was motivated by practical thinking. If you searched far enough into the past, almost all property had originated by theft or conquest. Without the guarantee of the right to one’s property, no one was safe. Burke felt that if enough time had passed, then that was sufficient to overlook the illegitimate origins of ownership (though he did not specify how much time he considered sufficient).

However, Burke did not extend protection to everything simply because it had existed.¹⁹⁸ Antiquity and prescription were not powerful enough titles to preserve inveterate abuses, and it was no defence of a pernicious system that it was an inheritance from the past.¹⁹⁹ That is why, as I explain below, he proposed significant reforms to Britain’s criminal justice system.

Theme II – Form and Composition of Government

¹⁹⁴ Burke, *Reflections*, in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 559.

¹⁹⁵ Burke, “Speech on Representation in the Commons,” in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 397.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 397-98.

¹⁹⁷ Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 1:247.

¹⁹⁸ Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 2:473.

¹⁹⁹ Parkin, *Moral Basis*, 125.

Burke believed that politics was a noble calling. Power was not an end itself, and those who pursued it for that reason were suspect. Power should be used to enlarge the social good, however that was determined.²⁰⁰ Government could be trusted only to the most virtuous and learned of men who had liberal, prospective views and who were willing to put public good ahead of private advantage.²⁰¹ For Burke, only the land-owning aristocracy typified by Rockingham's example had the necessary requisites of the statesman.

Yet it is inaccurate to charge, as many critics have, that Burke advocated for enlightened despotism or a benevolent dictatorship.²⁰² He firmly believed that the balanced Constitution provided the "people" a measure of input into how they were to be governed. But he did maintain a faith in "true natural aristocracy" as "the first benefactors of mankind," habituated by their upbringing to social leadership and therefore the best qualified to instruct fellow citizens in their "highest concerns."²⁰³ Their authority was justified on the basis of their ability to act for the whole people.²⁰⁴ Put another way, this class of men held political power in trusteeship for the masses and, shielded by their wealth from temptations in office, they could take the long view of the public interest.

Only a small class of the population was qualified to participate in the democratic election of legislators. No one had a natural right to participate in managing the affairs of society. Burke argued that "as to the share of power, authority, and direction which each individual ought

²⁰⁰ Cone, *Burke and the Nature of Politics*, 2:3.

²⁰¹ Burke said that "there is no qualification for government but virtue and wisdom, actual or presumptive." See Burke, *Reflections*, in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 540. See also Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 1:156.

²⁰² Hoffman and Levack, Introduction to *Burke's Politics*, xxi.

²⁰³ Burke, *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 652. There he elaborates upon what he means by "a true natural aristocracy."

²⁰⁴ Bromwich, *Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke*, 159.

to have in the management of the state, that I must deny to be amongst the direct original rights of man in civil society.”²⁰⁵ The masses were not discerning enough for the complexities of social reality and the science of government.

Society was not a simple mechanism. It was a complex organic composition that required painstaking study. Even the limited electorate of that time Burke thought too corrupt and ignorant. Too many uninformed, short-sighted voters led to vote-buying and servile governments.²⁰⁶ He believed that the opinion of the people was undependable and more apt to be wrong than right; hence, “to increase the power of the people in government would merely increase the power of wrong ideas and promote the endorsement of superficially plausible but essentially immoral policies.”²⁰⁷

Burke was ambivalent about democracy. Mostly he feared it, yet the expedient element of his thought recognized the dangers in attacking it. History had demonstrated that it was neither possible, nor particularly defensible, to try to crush a popular movement. However, he also had no faith that when given the chance the people would choose the public good over private advantage. They lacked the knowledge, the dignity, and the long, prospective views needed for that task. Modern mass democracy was still far in the future, but he would have given it little chance of succeeding.²⁰⁸

Burke staked out a middle ground. When Rockingham first asked for his counsel in the 1760s, Burke advised a middle course between opposite extremes. The subject was the anger of American colonies refusing to abide by the Stamp Act. Burke’s middle way would avoid

²⁰⁵ Burke, *Reflections*, in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 544.

²⁰⁶ Hoffman and Levack, Introduction to *Burke’s Politics*, xxiii; see also Cobban, *Edmund Burke and the Revolt Against the Eighteenth Century*, 60.

²⁰⁷ R.A. Smith, “Burke’s Crusade Against the French Revolution,” 38.

²⁰⁸ Bromwich, *Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke*, 240.

precipitating a military conflict while preserving the dignity of the Crown by maintaining Britain's right in principle to govern the colonies.²⁰⁹

Later, during the French Revolution, Burke again defended what he believed was the middle ground, or “third option,” between the despotism of monarchy and that of the multitude.²¹⁰ That middle ground he identified with the constitutional settlement of 1688. It had produced a state “both stable and libertarian, with a strong executive but also law-bound, learning from experience yet open to innovation, not claiming sole access to religious truth yet enjoying divine sanction.”²¹¹

While he spent most of his political career defending the independence of Parliament from George III's interference, Burke had always remained more fearful of the tyranny of the multitude.²¹² Philosophically an Aristotelian, Burke reasoned that democracy had much in common with tyranny, explaining that “the majority of the citizens is capable of exercising the cruellest oppressions upon the minority, whenever strong divisions prevail” upon any issue, which of course they must.²¹³ Majorities were at best unfair because they were arbitrary, and at worst they descended into mob rule. Numerical strength alone did not grant some “inherent power in the half or the majority of a nation, to annihilate the persons, the property, or the honors of the remainder, at their will and pleasure....”²¹⁴ Events in France had demonstrated the ease

²⁰⁹ Peter Burke, *Public and Domestic Life of Edmund Burke*, 55.

²¹⁰ Clark, Introduction to *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 24-25.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

²¹² He argued that “the tyranny of a multitude is but a multiplied tyranny,” and if given the choice he would have chosen the despotism of a single person over the despotism of the many. Burke to Captain Mercer, Feb. 26, 1790, quoted in Prior, *Life of Burke*, 2:77-80.

²¹³ Burke, *Reflections*, in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 583.

²¹⁴ Prior, *Life of Burke*, 2:108.

with which demagoguery could take hold.²¹⁵

Burke famously had strong views about the role of the elected representative. For one, he believed in a duty to resist mandates from constituents, which he made a theme of his victory speech to Bristol electors in 1774, offering that while the wishes of his constituents “ought to have great weight with him,” the representative should not be bound by “*authoritative* instructions.”²¹⁶ He continued, explaining that “*mandates* issued, which the Member is bound blindly and implicitly to obey, to vote, and to argue for . . . arise from a fundamental Mistake of the whole order and tenour of our Constitution.”²¹⁷ To Burke (as well as American Federalists such as James Madison) forbidding a representative’s reliance on his own judgement robbed the public of a source of practical wisdom. Lawmakers possessed a special expertise based upon their experience in politics and they owed it to the public to make use of it.²¹⁸

Parliament’s slavish obedience to the passing whims and passions of the people was just as wrong as complete subordination to the Crown.²¹⁹ Yet Burke also said that “to follow, not to force, the public inclination – to give a direction, a form, a technical dress, and a specific sanction, to the general sense of the community, is the true end of legislature.”²²⁰ In a similar vein, he wrote that it was the duty of legislators to “conform our government to the character and circumstances of the several people who composed this mighty and strangely diversified

²¹⁵ See Kirk, *Genius Reconsidered*, 132. Burke had witnessed this process first-hand during the Gordon Riots, when Protestant bigots, led by Lord George Gordon, demanded the repeal of a 1778 bill that had lifted some legal discriminations against Catholics.

²¹⁶ Burke, “Address to the Electors of Bristol,” 1774, quoted in Bromwich, *Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke*, 224.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

²¹⁹ Hoffman and Levack, Introduction to *Burke’s Politics*, xxiii.

²²⁰ Burke, “Letter to the Sheriffs of the City of Bristol,” in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 240.

mass.”²²¹ He knew that one method could not serve for the whole, that all parts of the Empire could not be “ordered in the same manner.”²²² It should be noted, however, that he had expressed these sentiments in the 1770s; the later Burke was more fearful of the “people.”

Despite a fear of angry mobs, it had to be acknowledged that at some point numbers alone could legitimize a grievance; how could it be illegitimate if so many felt aggrieved?²²³ Burke had famously said of rebellious Americans “I do not know the method of drawing up an indictment against an whole people. I cannot insult and ridicule the feelings of millions of my fellow-creatures.”²²⁴ Speaking in the House of Commons in 1770, he addressed the controversy over the Middlesex borough, where electors had repeatedly returned John Wilkes despite the steadfast refusal of Parliament to seat him. Drawing on historical precedent, Burke argued that to ignore the anger of Middlesex voters who were petitioning on behalf of Wilkes would be to invite a rebellion, even revolution. It was in the best interests of the aristocratic government to redress the popular grievance.²²⁵

Burke’s views of who to entrust with the reigns of government and who was entitled to participate in the political process were premised on his idealized conception of Britain’s aristocratic leadership and on his low estimation of the public. On one hand, the wealthiest and oldest families had the wherewithal to educate and train their children for the complexities of government administration, and their wealth shielded them from the temptation to enrich themselves from the public purse. On the other hand, the people, though they had a right to voice their displeasure by voting, were not nearly as educated or as selfless as the aristocrats. More

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 241.

²²² *Ibid.*

²²³ Bromwich, *Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke*, 240.

²²⁴ Burke, “Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies,” in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 201.

²²⁵ Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 1:287-88.

than that, the people too often were irrational and emotional, and strengthening their voting numbers would lead to mob rule.

Theme III – Rights and Freedoms in Civil Society

For Burke, protection of private property was the fundamental right. It was the reason why people had long ago first entered into civil societies, so that others could not arbitrarily deny one's right to inherit, acquire, and transmit property.²²⁶ Safeguarding property was the foundation of an ordered and civilized society. An attack on property was an attack on government, and the destruction of property would lead to the destruction of law, religion, and morality.²²⁷

What's more, liberty issued from private ownership. Since at least the *Magna Carta*, liberty had been intertwined with the power of taxation. When that power had rested entirely with the King, his subjects could be dispossessed of their lands by whim. Control of the public purse carried with it power over property. Without it, there could be no freedom.²²⁸ This had been a pivotal outcome of the Glorious Revolution in 1688.

Liberty also issued from order. Good order was the foundation of all good things; liberty was worthless except in an orderly community.²²⁹ For Burke, “the *only* liberty . . . is a liberty connected with *order*; and that not only exists *with* order and virtue, but cannot exist at all *without* them.”²³⁰ That kind of liberty, he continued, “inheres in good and steady government”.²³¹

²²⁶ Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 2:321.

²²⁷ Cobban, *Edmund Burke and the Revolt Against the Eighteenth Century*, 193-94.

²²⁸ Canavan, *Political Economy of Edmund Burke*, 35-37.

²²⁹ Cobban, *Edmund Burke and the Revolt Against the Eighteenth Century*, 55-56.

²³⁰ Burke, *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 633.

²³¹ *Ibid.*

Sometimes, that meant restricting what Burke called human “wants,” but which Revolutionaries called “rights.” An ordered society required that “the passions of individuals” and “the inclinations of men should frequently be thwarted, their will controlled, and their passions brought into subjection.”²³²

Burke said that “the *extreme* of liberty (which is its abstract perfection, but its real fault) contains nowhere, nor ought to obtain anywhere; because extremes . . . in every point which relates either to our duties or satisfactions in life, are destructive both to virtue and enjoyment.”²³³ Thus, he concluded, “liberty, too, must be limited in order to be possessed.”²³⁴ If unrestrained, as the Jacobins would have it, it would lead only to a totalitarian state of mass despotism.²³⁵ He deeply feared the power of the human intelligence “when divorced from all social constraints.”²³⁶ Burke knew that too often “the desire and design of a tyrannic domination lurks in the claim of an extravagant liberty.”²³⁷ That liberty “inflicted or permitted the most grinding tyranny and injustice on persons and property.”²³⁸

Despite his natural inclination to avoid tinkering, however, in some ways Burke was far in advance of his time, particularly in his advocacy for a more humane approach to criminal justice. He criticized the entire system of penal laws, often singling out the draconian punishments for offences that had posed little danger to public safety. For moral and practical

²³² Burke, *Reflections*, in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 545.

²³³ Burke, “A Letter to the Sheriffs of the City of Bristol,” in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 243.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

²³⁵ Hoffman and Levack, Introduction to *Burke’s Politics*, xix.

²³⁶ Clark, Introduction to *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 39.

²³⁷ Burke, *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, in *The Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 642.

²³⁸ Prior, *Life of Burke*, 2:106.

reasons, he also believed that the use of capital punishment should be severely restricted.²³⁹

Though it did little to help his reputation among those already suspicious of his Catholic background, Burke also sought legislative action to end the state's persecution of dissident Protestant sects as well as Catholics. He continued defending the right to freedom of religious worship until the 1790s, when his anti-revolutionary priorities took precedence.²⁴⁰ Such persecution was morally wrong and bad for society because it punished those groups "for acting upon a principle of which of all others is perhaps the most necessary for preserving society, an implicit admiration and adherence to the establishments of their forefathers."²⁴¹

Toleration was to be encouraged, even if diversity was not. Diversity in race and religion had led to disputes, so Burke cautioned against promoting it.²⁴² Where it already existed, however, it was to be tolerated, especially on religious matters, because "toleration, so far from being an attack upon Christianity, becomes the best and surest support that possibly can be given to it."²⁴³ He added that he "would have toleration a part of establishment, as a principle favorable to Christianity, and as a part of Christianity."²⁴⁴ Toleration was a necessary social utility. In *Reflections*, Burke wrote that "we tolerate even these [vice and luxury] – not from love of them, but for fear of worse. We tolerate them, because property and liberty, to a degree, require that toleration."²⁴⁵ Religion was "the basis of civil society, and the source of all good, and of all

²³⁹ Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 2:22.

²⁴⁰ Burke, "Speech on the Relief of Protestant Dissenters," in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 372-76. Until the start of the French Revolution, Burke encouraged toleration of religious minorities. After that, Dissenters like Reverend Joseph Priestly became the target of his invective because they were the chief domestic source of revolutionary ideas.

²⁴¹ Burke, "Tract on the Popery Laws," in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 267.

²⁴² Burke, "Speech on the Relief of Protestant Dissenters," in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 375. But, he added, "when you have it, bear it."

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 372.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 373.

²⁴⁵ Burke, *Reflections*, in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 607.

comfort.”²⁴⁶ He traced social stability to the cohesive effects of religion.²⁴⁷ As an Anglican, Burke “believed that the Church should be an element of the ruling order.”²⁴⁸

As for the state, finally, Burke believed it should be minimalist. His conception of government was that it could prevent evil, but it was not capable of much positive good. Thus, he would have had no partiality for the limited-liability state which nineteenth-century liberalism would produce.²⁴⁹ The state was responsible for “the exterior establishment of its religion; its magistracy; its revenue; its military force by sea and land; the corporations that owe their existence to its fiat,” or, in other words, “to every thing that is *truly and properly* public, to the public peace, to the public safety, to the public order, to the public prosperity.”²⁵⁰

An example will serve to illustrate his view. A succession of poor harvests in the 1790s had increased the cost of food, which in turn led to increasing hunger among the poorest classes. Yet Burke argued that government should not interfere with the free market by attempting cost controls. Food subsidies for the poor were doomed to fail.²⁵¹ Government could and should encourage the provision of food, medicine, and other necessities, he said, but it must not attempt “to supply that which nature has withheld; it has neither the duty nor the power of providing the necessities of life for the people.”²⁵² Burke’s habitual solution was to entrust such things to private charity and to the Church.²⁵³

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 560.

²⁴⁷ Clark, Introduction to *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 91.

²⁴⁸ Pocock, Introduction to *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, xxviii.

²⁴⁹ Hoffman and Levack, Introduction to *Burke’s Politics*, xvii.

²⁵⁰ Edmund Burke, *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity, Originally Presented to the Right Hon. William Pitt, in the Month of November, 1795*, (London: 1800), 45-46.

²⁵¹ Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 1:322. Lock says that Burke’s speeches on corn in 1770-72 reveal an earlier commitment to free markets.

²⁵² Cobban, *Edmund Burke and the Revolt Against the Eighteenth Century*, 192.

²⁵³ Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 1:59. This was always Burke’s solution to the economic plight of others. In an early essay while still a student Burke had argued that the cure for the country’s

He believed there were good reasons to leave such things to the market. First, as a man of deep faith he believed in a Providential design. Earthly misery had been a permanent feature of human existence, so it must have been part of God's plan. In that case, it was impious to object and to meddle.²⁵⁴ Second, it was better to endure an existing evil than invite others with "imprudent tinkering."²⁵⁵ Consumers may suffer in the interim, but they would benefit in the long-term from high food prices since it would encourage farmers to increase output, which would, in turn, lead to cheaper food. Attempts to interfere with this natural process would distort the market and incur different, possibly worse, problems.²⁵⁶ To borrow an idiom, "it was better the devil you know."

Summary – Burke's Legacy and Test

The foregoing has identified three general principles that together can be used to test for "Burkean" influence. The first was rejection of abstract theorizing. His political philosophy was based on the lessons of human history. While an idea or a principle, such as liberty, may be desirable in the abstract, legislators should consider how its application would work given considerations of previous experience and of circumstance. French revolutionaries ignored that lesson to their detriment. As in medicine, the first priority in government was do no harm. Reform must be approached cautiously and enacted in such a way as to preserve in spirit what had worked for previous generations.

economic ills was "benevolent paternalism on the part of landlords."

²⁵⁴ Russell Kirk, "Burke and the Philosophy of Prescription," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 14, no. 3 (June 1953): 365-89; see also Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 2:521: "to break 'the laws of commerce' was indeed to break 'the laws of God'."

²⁵⁵ Kirk, *Genius Reconsidered*, 91.

²⁵⁶ Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 1:322-23.

Second, Burke was a proponent of the balanced constitutional order, as he understood it, that emerged from the Glorious Revolution. It had established an effective equipoise between the forces of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, and it had endured, with minor modifications, to his day. He had variously defended it from threats posed by the recalcitrant King as well as Jacobins determined to subvert the social order. Always, he argued that public-spirited aristocrats, acting in accordance with the general feeling and approval of a narrowly-defined “people,” were best qualified to act in the interests of the nation.

Third, freedom and public order depended on the protection of private property and conscience, and some restriction of individual liberties. That meant defending title to property even if it had been obtained through usurpation or conquest. It also meant curtailing individual freedoms (i.e. radical speech if it could lead to violence) and restrictions on self-destructive behaviours such as drinking and gambling; the people often needed to be protected from themselves. Human nature was both good and evil. The savage lurked just beneath the surface of every man. Restrictions prevented the worst features of that nature from threatening society.

Ideally, government provided everyone with the opportunity to procure what they could for themselves and their families, but it should not, and could not, mandate equality of outcome. If the free market did not serve all equally well, government intervention would only make matters worse; as it always had, a state-sanctioned Church of England would care for those left behind. Not without compassion, Burke made room for toleration of religious dissidents, and encouraged mitigating the most draconian features of the justice system.

So, Burke was “essentially a Court Whig trying to apply the essence of Walpolean and Pelhamite doctrine” to the altered political scene of the late eighteenth century.²⁵⁷ His fear of

²⁵⁷ Reed Browning, “The Origin of Burke’s Ideas Revisited,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 18, no.

concentrating too much power in either the Commons or the Crown echoed the concerns expressed by the Court Whigs in the 1730s and 1740s. It had been a core feature of Court Whiggism to insist that the capacity of government to provide positive benefits for its citizens was limited. So too was the belief that government stood upon public opinion (in the sense that it could exercise power only insofar as those subject to that power believed in the rightness of that authority).²⁵⁸

Burke became known as the most influential statesman and political thinker in the British tradition. His stock remained high in Macdonald's lifetime, making it at least plausible that the latter may have been influenced by him. Few others had been so venerated and widely cited in the British political tradition. However, the historiography of Burke shows that his political thought has been subject to much misunderstanding. Burke's body of thought was complex because it was situational. It assigned different priorities in different circumstances. He cannot be classified as just a Court Whig, or a Utilitarian, or even a Conservative. Yet Burke has variously been claimed by all sides.

The test presented here provides a rigorous method of evaluating whether key Burkean principles were operational in an object of historical inquiry. It will be applied in Chapter Four to take the measure of Macdonald as he led the Confederation project that produced the modern Canadian state. But first, in the next chapter, the test will be applied to Macdonald's intellectual development as revealed by evidence from his formative years and the early years of his political career.

1 (Autumn, 1984): 65. Browning is referring to the administrations of prime ministers Sir Robert Walpole (1721-1742) and Henry Pelham (1743-1754). Browning said Burke had been "the last of the Walpoleans" (*Ibid.*, 71).

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 65-66.

CHAPTER THREE:

THE BURKEAN LEGACY IN MACDONALD'S FORMATIVE YEARS

Introduction

Political ideas and interests are not formed overnight. Convictions develop slowly through interactions with the ideas and personalities to which one is exposed, especially in youth when the mind is most impressionable.¹ In Macdonald's case, the bent of his mind had probably been determined before his first electoral contest in 1844, when he was in his late twenties.² A circumstantial case can be made that Macdonald absorbed Burkean ideas as part of his intellectual formation.

As we have seen, Burke's thought had retained currency in the coalition which governed Britain until the 1830s. Macdonald was coming of age when the direct influence of Burke was waning, in a colony thousands of miles away. Nevertheless, Burke's ideas continued to be part of the intellectual equipment of statesmen and political thinkers throughout the English-speaking world. Moreover, Burke was a significant touchstone in the literary tradition to which he had

¹ For an example applicable to Canada, see Bruce Curtis, *True Government by Choice Men? Inspection, Education, and State Formation in Canada West*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 9. Curtis draws on the work of historical sociologists like Philip Abrams, who, in their analyses of the historical development of social institutions, show that people are formed through them while also re-creating and modifying such institutions in the process. See Philip Abrams, *Historical Sociology*, (Near Shepton Mallet, Somerset, England: Open Books, 1982). Alternatively, one may consult the literature on "political socialization." For a discussion, see Neil McDonald, "Political Socialization Research, the School, and the Educational Historian" in *Monographs in Education V: Approaches to Educational History*, 65-84, ed. David C. Jones et al., (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba, 1981). According to McDonald, the concept of political socialization "refers to the process by which individuals learn the ways of a group or society so that they may function in it," and it includes both intended (i.e. school) and unintended (social interactions) political learning (*Ibid.*, 65-66).

² Donald Creighton, "Sir John A. Macdonald and Kingston," *Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association* 29, no. 1 (1950): 74. Creighton argues that it was "long before" but is not specific and provides no evidence to support his claim. This is a typical example of how Creighton et al. wrote about Macdonald.

contributed before entering politics. Macdonald must surely have been exposed to Burkean concepts in some form. Intellectual history methodology would, however, ask how those concepts would have been reshaped by the exigencies of a different time and place and whether there was clear evidence of them guiding Macdonald's actions.

This chapter begins with an overview of the political culture of Upper Canada in general and Kingston in particular in the years of Macdonald's youth.³ It then examines Macdonald's education and legal training, looking for Burkean influences. It also explores Macdonald's extensive reading interests.⁴ These sections build a case that Macdonald could very well have absorbed parts of Burke's political philosophy through the cultural and intellectual influences around him, but do not prove conclusively the effect of this climate. In an attempt to find some convincing evidence that Burke influenced the young Macdonald, the chapter then applies the Burkean test to a number of pronouncements from his early political career.

Political Culture in Kingston and Upper Canada in the Early-Nineteenth Century

Born in Scotland in 1815, Macdonald emigrated to Kingston, Upper Canada with his family in 1820. Macdonald spent his early life in a conservative environment in which social and

³ This section is based in part on essays about community leaders like Reverend John Strachan and John Beverley Robinson, and in part on essays specifically devoted to local history, such as the collection edited by Gerald Tulchinsky. The *Historic Kingston* journal managed by the Kingston Historical Society also provided a number of helpful articles that spoke to Macdonald's life and political career in the community. This journal began in the 1950s, so it has over sixty years of content. Its editors have included historians Jane Errington and Brian Osborne. See <http://www.kingstonhistoricalsociety.ca/historic-kingston/>.

⁴ The first two are based on secondary sources about both Macdonald and Kingston from 1820 to the early 1840s. These include the classic two-volume biography of Macdonald by Donald Creighton, the more recent two-volume biography by Richard Gwyn, biographies written around the time of Macdonald's death in 1891, the two-volume memoirs of Macdonald's long-time private secretary Sir Joseph Pope, many journal articles and two graduate dissertations.

political attitudes were dominated by the Court Whig ideas Burke had famously defended.⁵ That is the strongest basis on which to claim that in his formative years, Macdonald was introduced to, and probably shaped by, Burkean political ideas. Court thought had been circulating in Upper Canada since United Empire Loyalists first began arriving during the American Revolution. It was also brought by immigrants from the British Isles who took on positions of importance and influence in Upper Canada.

Though Kingston was sometimes dissatisfied with the old Tory party in Canada, it was nevertheless a firmly conservative community, and it was in this “political atmosphere that Macdonald grew to manhood.”⁶ Every member of his family, most of his early friends, his legal mentor, and members of social institutions like the St. Andrews Society “were all Conservatives.”⁷ The common political school Macdonald shared with the “young men with whom he first mingled” was conservative, and in fact “in and about Kingston everything was on the side of conservatism; the wealth, the influence, in great measure the intelligence, the social standing, and the prospects.”⁸ Thus, “it was impossible that he [Macdonald] could have been other than a tory, taking into consideration his birth, early training and associations.”⁹

Between the War of 1812 and the union of Upper and Lower Canada in 1841, Upper Canadian conservatism was a blend of two streams of thought. The first stream was Loyalist

⁵ Recall from the Introduction that, for the sake of clarity, I said that I would use “conservative” and “tory” to refer to the Court Whigs and their ideas.

⁶ Creighton, “Sir John A. Macdonald and Kingston,” 75. It may be said that it is problematic to cite Creighton and S.F. Wise (see below, this chapter) for such background on Macdonald and Kingston when my project involves critiquing their work. However, the principle critique this dissertation makes of members of the Creighton school is centred on their interpretations, not the information presented by them.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ J.E. Collins, *Life and Times of the Rt. Hon. Sir John A. Macdonald*, (Toronto: 1883), 64.

⁹ *Ibid.*

conservatism. It was brought by the founders of the colony who were loyal to King and Empire, and who were particularly uncomfortable with the constitutional order in the United States.

Fleeing Loyalists believed that American colonists had endangered the constitutional balance that was needed for political stability by empowering the democratic branch of government at the expense of an effective executive branch. Moreover, the Loyalists were conservatives (aka Court Whigs) because “their defence of commerce, luxury, Crown patronage, and the system of public credit” was perfectly in line with the Court Whig response to civic humanism.¹⁰

The second stream was brought by the officials, like Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe, appointed to govern the colony and maintain its place in the Empire. It was the Toryism of late-eighteenth-century England, that mixture of Tories and Burke-led Whigs trying to preserve a mid-century Court Whig orthodoxy that was now under siege from democratic reformers.¹¹ Thus, it was a “conservatism freshly minted by Burke’s philippics against the French Revolution.”¹² By the 1820s, the two streams of thought – the Loyalist and British Tory – had blended together. It is also worth noting here that many of the émigrés from the British Isles were Scots, whose homeland had bred key parts of the Court Whig philosophy.¹³

¹⁰ Peter J. Smith, “Civic Humanism Versus Liberalism: Fitting the Loyalists In,” in *Canada’s Origins: Liberal, Tory, or Republican?*, ed. Janet Ajzenstat and Peter J. Smith, (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1995), 117, 115.

¹¹ Again, the British “Tories” prior to the French Revolution were Court Whigs who held office and their supporters. They were aligned with the Crown. Burke’s political ideas made him more of a Court Whig than a Country Whig, but he spent most of his career in opposition because he believed George III to be a corrupt monarch. It was only after 1790 that events forced him to support the Crown since, in his opinion, it was no longer the greatest threat to the balanced Constitution.

¹² S.F. Wise, *God’s Peculiar Peoples: Essays on Political Culture in Nineteenth-Century Canada*, (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1993), 169.

¹³ Adam Smith and David Hume, in particular, were two of the most prominent Scots who championed Court Whig ideas. See, for example, Peter J. Smith, “The Ideological Origins of Canadian Confederation,” in *Canada’s Origins: Liberal, Tory, or Republican?*, ed. Janet Ajzenstat and Peter J. Smith, (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1995), 47-78.

Loyalists and immigrants from Scotland had a monopoly on local religious, economic, and political leadership. Among the former group, particularly those arriving after 1800, most were Federalists, meaning they had a political philosophy that was closer to contemporary British conservatism than to Jeffersonian civic republicanism (which quickly became ascendant in the U.S. following Thomas Jefferson's contentious victory in the presidential election of 1800). In fact, American Federalists like Alexander Hamilton developed much of their thinking on the French Revolution, and republicanism generally, by reading reports and opinions in Britain's conservative press, where Burke had been the leading opinion-maker.¹⁴ The affection had been reciprocated by Burke, who admired the Federalists and believed they were the best hope for the United States against the southern, more democratic states.¹⁵

Loyalists placed order and tradition above the desire for liberty and innovation.¹⁶ Burke had offered perhaps the best explanation as to why the maintenance of social order must be prioritized above individual liberty. Prominent Loyalists Richard Cartwright and Robert Hamilton seem to have held a Burkean view of the appropriate relationship between government and the people. While they would apply the principles and ideals of the British Constitution to Upper Canada, Cartwright and Hamilton believed legislators must remain conscious of the unique circumstances of the community. According to Cartwright, "a government should be formed for a country," and not "a country strained and distorted for the accommodation of a preconceived and speculative scheme of government."¹⁷ This echoed one of Burke's most

¹⁴ Jane Errington, *The Lion, the Eagle, and Upper Canada: A Developing Colonial Ideology*, (Kingston & Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), 61.

¹⁵ Russell Kirk, *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered*, (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1967), 132.

¹⁶ Dennis Duffy, *Gardens, Covenants, Exiles: Loyalism in the Literature of Upper Canada/Ontario*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 44.

¹⁷ Errington, *A Developing Colonial Ideology*, 30.

famous maxims.

Historian and scholarly archivist Terry Cook argued that Burkean thought was central to Loyalist conservatism, pointing to Burke's influence on John Beverley Robinson (1791-1863).¹⁸ In Macdonald's lifetime, Robinson was a central figure in the government of Upper Canada; he was a member of the Legislative Assembly, then a Legislative Councillor, Executive Councillor, and Chief Justice. Like Burke, Robinson had "learned to admire British society where constitutional equilibrium was reinforced by and mirrored in social ranks."¹⁹ Robinson worried that immigration to Upper Canada would soon mean that a large and uncontrolled populace would be able to dictate its terms to the government, as in the United States. That attitude, Cook argued, was "pure Burke" (though by no means was it exclusive to him – indeed, it was widely-shared).²⁰

Moreover, Robinson had grave doubts about whether the "exigencies of temporary human caprices were a sufficient cause for altering those institutions which bore the sanction of the ages."²¹ It was the same doubt that had famously been expressed in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Robinson's conservatism "was a carefully articulated exposition of the

¹⁸ Terry Cook, "John Beverley Robinson and the Conservative Blueprint for the Upper Canadian Community," *Historical Essays on Upper Canada*, ed. J.K. Johnson, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1975), 79-94. Cook says that Loyalism and conservatism became the same thing at that time, and that both venerated the assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs of Burke, among others (*Ibid.*, 80-81). Another such figure was William Morris, a founder of Queen's University and an esteemed political and religious leader in Upper Canada between 1820 and 1850. See Hilda Neatby, "The Honourable William Morris, 1786-1858," *Historic Kingston*, no. 20 (1972): 65-76.

¹⁹ Cook, "John Beverley Robinson," 81.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 82. It could be said that because Cook made these claims about Robinson at the tail-end of the Burkanadians' project, he, too, was a Burkanadian. However, Cook's claims here are based in stronger historical evidence and articulated more convincingly than the earlier Burkean claims of Creighton et al. Plus they refer to a figure of the early nineteenth-century, not the Confederation period to which the Burkanadians' claim primarily referred.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

well-respected principles of Burkean and Blackstonian conservatism.”²²

Political scientist Peter J. Smith explained that Loyalism was “probably closest to the ideology of the Court”; both had “emphasized what was empirical, practical and useful over abstract political ideas i.e. ideas not grounded in experience and reality.”²³ While this kind of Whig philosophy had preceded them, Burke and the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers arguably did the most to define it in the final decades of the eighteenth century; its ideas were notably articulated by Scots David Hume, William Blackstone, and Adam Smith. Although Burke himself was Irish in origin, these Scottish intellectual luminaries also played a critical role in legitimizing Court Whig thought. Their influence was evident in the political culture of Scottish immigrants to Upper Canada.

As an acquaintance of Hume and Smith, Burke sometimes borrowed from them, but he contributed many of his own ideas to Court Whiggism as well, and in conservative Upper Canada these ideas predominated. Smith concluded that “if one stops to consider Loyalist, and later Canadian conservative attitudes towards such concepts as authority, liberty, the mixed constitution, passion, faction, duties, the origins and purposes of government and the nature of man and society an ideological pattern emerges that is one of the same genus as the Court and nineteenth-century Burkean conservatism.”²⁴

Powerful Protestant leaders also circulated Burkean ideas. Church of Englanders and Presbyterians (like Strachan) agreed that just as in Britain, the state and the Church should be bound together, and to defend this position they regularly borrowed rhetoric from British

²² *Ibid.*, 93.

²³ Peter J. Smith, “The Ideological Genesis of Canadian Confederation,” Ph.D. diss., Carleton University, 1983, 205, 208.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 208.

thinkers like Burke.²⁵ Though he fought to lift draconian legal restrictions on Catholics, Burke never wavered in his commitment to the Church of England as the only state-sanctioned religion. It had been a key plank in his political philosophy. The need for a state church necessarily followed from the dominant cultural assumption among political and religious leaders that religion alone could inculcate and sustain the social ideal that order was essential to civil society. Only in an ordered society could individuals enjoy freedom and liberty.²⁶

The Court Whig-infused Toryism of late-eighteenth-century Britain would also have been brought to Kingston by the local garrison. The military exerted a strong though immeasurable conservative influence on Kingston society, making it seem “almost old world, rather than new-world.”²⁷ In Macdonald’s formative years, the officer corps, in particular, was still steeped in traditions and social mores that had not changed since the eighteenth century.²⁸ Their consciousness was still one of class distinctions, social hierarchy, and chivalry, and was thus closer to the Britain of Burke’s time than to frontier democracy. Eager to identify with the British and disassociate themselves from Americans, Kingstontians “aped the mannerisms and the style of the English officers and their wives.”²⁹

In this way, the garrison kept up a current of feeling and ideas from Britain and marked “Kingstontians with a particular seal” that differentiated them from other Upper Canadian

²⁵ William Westfall, *Two Worlds: The Protestant Culture of Nineteenth-Century Ontario*, (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989), 89.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

²⁷ A.R.M. Lower, “The Character of Kingston,” in *To Preserve and Defend: Essays on Kingston in the Nineteenth-Century*, ed. Gerald Tulchinsky, (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1976), 35.

²⁸ Richard Preston, “The British Influence of RMC,” in *To Preserve and Defend: Essays on Kingston in the Nineteenth-Century*, ed. by Gerald Tulchinsky, (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1976), 120.

²⁹ James A. Roy, *Kingston: The King’s Town*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1952), 32.

communities.³⁰ Yet, much like the contention that Burke's ideas shaped Confederation, the influence of the garrison cannot be measured precisely. Preston argued that it was difficult to measure the impact the presence of the officers had, but the impact on Kingston was nevertheless real, "buried deep in the fabric of its life."³¹ That was confirmed when the garrison was removed, and others noted the effect this had on locals. In the 1870s, Commander of the Militia in Canada, Selby Smyth, requested the return of troops to preserve British attitudes, which were fading because of the social and economic influence of the United States.³²

Despite all the ways in which the Kingston of Macdonald's youth exhibited Court Whig influences, the political culture of the Upper Canada of Macdonald's formative years and early political career was markedly different from that in which Burke operated. Debates in Burke's Britain had played out among only the small circle of political and intellectual elites. By the 1830s, in contrast, political authority in Upper Canada increasingly derived from a growing reasoning public. As Jeffrey McNairn has shown, new voluntary associations "were schools for the public sphere," instructing individuals "in the public use of their reason."³³ Colonial newspapers disseminated ideas and information to ensure that the new reasoning public was adequately informed. Upper Canada was developing a robust deliberative democracy that entertained important political debates.³⁴

Under these circumstances, however, it is likely that Burke's ideas circulated beyond conservative elites. McNairn's study shows, for example, that Burke was vigorously debated by

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Preston, "The British Influence of RMC," 123.

³² *Ibid.*, 121.

³³ Jeffrey L. McNairn, *The Capacity to Judge: Public Opinion and Deliberative Democracy in Upper Canada, 1791-1854*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 16.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

competing factions of the Reform Party after its leader, Robert Baldwin, declared his Burkean view that elected legislators had a duty to act as representatives and not as delegates. Most opinion on the Reform side attacked Baldwin's position, but his remarks nevertheless spurred a province-wide debate among Reformers on the merits of this Burkean tenet.³⁵ Here was yet another example of the malleability of Burke's ideological legacy.

Biography – Macdonald's Formative Years, 1820-1842

Macdonald began attending school within a year of his arrival in Canada as a five-year-old. Though little is known about the curriculum or broad goals of the specific schools he attended, the general character of Upper Canadian schooling in this period can be characterized. To the extent that there was a coordinated, state-funded education system during Macdonald's formative years, it had been guided by Reverend John Strachan (1778-1867).³⁶ Strachan had a profound influence on the development of Upper Canadian society.³⁷ A product of the renowned Scottish school system, Strachan had emigrated to Upper Canada at the end of the eighteenth

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 336.

³⁶ See R.D. Gidney, "Elementary Education in Upper Canada: A Reassessment," *Ontario History* 65, no. 3 (September 1973): 169-185, and Alison L. Prentice and Susan E. Houston, eds., *Family, School and Society in Nineteenth-Century Canada*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1975). Schooling in the 1820s was still marked by disorganization and voluntarism, both of which produced a wide variety of educational experiences and outcomes (though all children learned the three Rs – reading, writing, and arithmetic). Schools tended to lack common character, and they varied in size, organization, and management. They were also impermanent. The centralized educational system developed by Egerton Ryerson and other reformers to produce the kind of obedient, self-regulated capitalist subjects needed in the new age of democratic governance did not begin to appear until at least the late 1830s. That kind of system has since been regarded as one of the keys to the formation of the Canadian state. See, for example, Curtis, *True Government by Choice Men?*

³⁷ Laurence S. Fallis, Jr., "The Idea of Progress in the Province of Canada," in *The Shield of Achilles: Aspects of Canada in the Victorian Age*, ed. W.L. Morton, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1968), 173.

century, and within a few years had started the Cornwall Grammar School. According to educational historian J.D. Purdy, “Strachan’s enthusiasm for education was derived from his experiences in Scotland” where schools were regarded as vehicles for impoverished youth to “ascend the social ladder.”³⁸

Strachan’s school, opened in 1803, set standards for curriculum content and instructional methods by which other schools would be measured. The province was sufficiently impressed by the success of his model that in 1807 it committed for the first time to a significant annual outlay of grants to any district that would attempt to establish a similar school.³⁹ Later, in 1816, and at the behest of Strachan’s repeated insistence, the Common School Act was passed to encourage the growth of common schools throughout the colony.⁴⁰ Strachan was “universally recognized as a most successful teacher” and “an authority on education.”⁴¹ His earliest students had been the sons of Upper Canada’s political and professional leaders.⁴² He became the Rector of York and a member of the Legislative Council, making him a leading member of the ‘Family Compact.’⁴³

Similar lines of thought are strongly suggestive of a Burkean influence upon Strachan and that influence was reflected in Strachan’s educational priorities. For example, Strachan feared a republican and democratic government, and so he preached love and respect for the

³⁸ J.D. Purdy, “John Strachan’s Educational Policies, 1815-1841,” *Ontario History*, no. 64 (March 1972): 45.

³⁹ Paul Axelrod, *The Promise of Schooling: Education in Canada, 1800-1914*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 15. The *District School Act* awarded grants to cover part of the costs in running a school.

⁴⁰ George W. Spragge, “Elementary Education in Upper Canada, 1820-1840,” *Ontario History* 43, no. 3 (July 1951): 109.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴² Errington, *A Developing Colonial Ideology*, 93.

⁴³ Spragge, “Elementary Education in Upper Canada, 1820-1840,” 109.

British constitution.⁴⁴ To protect children from the contamination of republican ideas, every candidate for a teaching position had to be a natural born subject of his Majesty.⁴⁵ Of course, distrust of republican institutions was commonplace. Yet historian Jane Errington summed up Strachan's main belief to be that "democratic impulses had led to the levelling of hierarchy and disintegration of social order."⁴⁶ That kind of language was Burkean. Strachan's thinking had mirrored Burke's in other ways. Both would let circumstance dictate changes in policy, making them appear progressive. Strachan's willingness to go against tradition by accepting a degree of lay representation among the clergy was revolutionary for its day. Both valued the institution of aristocracy but were unafraid of criticizing it, and both believed in the need for an established state church as a guarantor of social order.⁴⁷

Again, Strachan's views are instructive because his fingerprints were all over the developing education system just as Macdonald was arriving in Upper Canada with his family in 1820. The Common School Act of 1816 had been largely drafted by Strachan himself, and with two amendments (first in 1820 and then in 1824), Strachan's educational policies remained the basis of the elementary school system in Upper Canada until 1841.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ G. M. Craig, "Strachan, John," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 9, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–, accessed November 25, 2016, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/strachan_john_9E.html.

⁴⁵ Purdy, "John Strachan's Educational Policies, 1815-1841," 47.

⁴⁶ Errington, *A Developing Colonial Ideology*, 48. "Levellers" was the term Burke had given to the radical reformers championing perfect equality. History, he believed, had repeatedly shown that attempts to "level" had only ever led to destruction of the natural social hierarchies on which political stability was supposedly based.

⁴⁷ Gerald Craig, *Upper Canada: The Formative Years, 1784-1841*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1963), 170.

⁴⁸ G. M. Craig, "Strachan, John," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 9, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–, accessed January 15, 2019, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/strachan_john_9E.html.

Macdonald's first teacher was an "old Scotchman named Pringle."⁴⁹ He then entered the Maxwell Academy in Kingston at the corner of Bagot and Queen Streets. Headmaster Maxwell liked to make "free use of the cane," though Macdonald was "seldom whacked" because he usually presented his case with skill (though without much regard for scruples).⁵⁰ Later Macdonald hagiography attributed to Maxwell the remark that his pupil's disregard for scruples would make him "a better lawyer than clergyman."⁵¹

In 1825 Macdonald and his family moved forty miles west to Hay Bay, in Prince Edward County. The nearest schoolhouse was twenty miles south in Adolphustown. It had been built by the United Empire Loyalists who first settled the area.⁵² Macdonald's teacher was "Old Hughes," a stern and "crabbed old Scotchman" who enjoyed punishing students with rough discipline.⁵³ Again, Macdonald's stay was not long. His parents had already decided he should pursue a legal career, and the best preparatory school for that was back in Kingston.

Within a few months he was sent to the Kingston District Grammar School, which he would attend for the next five years. The school enjoyed an excellent reputation. Headmaster George Baxter was a product of Oxford University, and the syllabus consisted of "elementary

⁴⁹ Andrew Lockhardt, "The Early Life of John A. Macdonald, 1815-1844," Master's thesis, Queen's University, 1931, 5.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 5-6. As source for this quotation, Lockhardt cited the June 6, 1891 edition of the *Toronto Globe*. Indeed, many of the quotations in his graduate thesis are taken from Canadian newspapers, including the *Globe* but also the *Montreal Witness*, the *Upper Canada Herald*, and the *Weekly British Whig*. It bears repeating that we must be critical of one's sources when hagiography appears to intrude. Of course, that is a particular danger with Macdonald, whose many enthusiasts have often projected endearing characteristics back on his younger self.

⁵² E.B. Biggar, *Anecdotal Life of Sir John Macdonald*, (Montreal: John Lovell & Son, 1891), 23-24.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 24.

studies in English, Horace, the Greek Testament, Virgil, Euclid and Algebra.”⁵⁴ There appears to have been nothing particularly Burkean about this curricula. According to one of his nineteenth-century biographers, Macdonald demonstrated talents for Classics and Mathematics.⁵⁵ Young Macdonald was a “promising student” who also did well in Latin and some French.⁵⁶ Living away from his parents, he boarded “with an old lady who lived on Rideau Street,” though he spent most of his free time with his relatives at the Macpherson household where he enjoyed spirited conversations with his cousins and reading from their extensive library.⁵⁷ Macdonald’s formal schooling ended in 1830 when he was fifteen. One commentator has opined (without solid proof) that because his teachers, and indeed most of the adults in his life, were Scottish, he learned from them qualities of sympathy, tolerance, and especially forbearance.⁵⁸

Macdonald’s Early Career, 1830-1844

Soon after, Macdonald was apprenticed to young local lawyer George Mackenzie, articling for him until 1832. Born in Scotland in 1797, Mackenzie had been one of many Scots who emigrated from Britain to Upper Canada after the War of 1812.⁵⁹ He was well-connected, a

⁵⁴ Lockhardt, “The Early Life of Macdonald,” 10-11. In the 1820s the school was also commonly called the Public School of the Midland District. It was founded about 1815.

⁵⁵ Collins, *Life and Times of Macdonald*, 24.

⁵⁶ Louis J. Flynn, “Canada’s Greatest Scot: Sir John Alexander Macdonald, a Centennial Tribute,” *Historic Kingston*, no. 16 (1968): 24.

⁵⁷ Lockhardt, “The Early Life of Macdonald,” 13. Lieutenant-Colonel John Macpherson was married to a sister of Macdonald’s mother Helen. Macdonald’s family had been accompanied on the voyage from Scotland by relatives common to the Macpherson’s, and were met upon arrival in Kingston by Lieut.-Col. Macpherson (*Ibid.*, 3).

⁵⁸ Sarah Katherine Gibson, Editor’s Note to *Canada Transformed: The Speeches of Sir John A. Macdonald*, ed. Sarah Katherine Gibson and Arthur Milnes, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2014), xxxvii-xxxix.

⁵⁹ William R. Teatero, “John A. Macdonald Learns – Articling with George Mackenzie.” *Historic Kingston*, no. 27 (1979): 92-112.

respected leader in the community's growing commercial and professional class. Macdonald was thus fortunate to start at his firm. Mackenzie probably mentored Macdonald in more than just the law since the latter was still an impressionable teenager when he boarded in the Mackenzie household during these years.⁶⁰ Interestingly, Macdonald in his youth seems not to have been the gregarious reveller of popular caricature. Rather, he was a "bookish" boy "dedicated to study", shy, quiet, and "introspective."⁶¹

Mackenzie has often been overlooked by historians, but he had a critical role in setting Macdonald's future course. If there was any man Macdonald was going to emulate, it was him.⁶² He provided the template, in terms of personality, kinds of connections, politics, and business sense, for his young protégé. Historian William Teatero claimed that Burkean Whig social and political ideas were obsolescent in Upper Canada by the 1830s (having survived from Simcoe through Strachan to J.B. Robinson and J.S. Cartwright), yet his account of Macdonald's legal mentor suggests that some of Burke's ideas had remained vital to George Mackenzie. For example, Macdonald apparently learned from Mackenzie that it was best to work within existing political institutions rather than attempt wholesale reforms, and like Mackenzie he would be hesitant to change institutions that had proven themselves effective if imperfect over the long course of time.

Mackenzie also eschewed political abstractions, preferring to direct his energy to practical matters. His position on the Clergy Reserves steered a middle way between the entrenched Tory and Reform camps. He was a practical, ambitious Scot who believed local

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 93-94; see also Flynn, "Canada's Greatest Scot," 26.

⁶¹ Teatero, "John A. Macdonald Learns," 94.

⁶² William Teatero, "A Dead and Alive Way Never Does: The Pre-Political Professional World of John A. Macdonald," Master's thesis, Queen's University, 1978, 68.

government should focus on commercial development while avoiding abstract debates that inflamed philosophical or ideological beliefs.⁶³

Macdonald was a diligent student and learned quickly under Mackenzie's mentorship. By 1832, Mackenzie trusted his seventeen-year-old protégé enough to handle his new branch office in Napanee.⁶⁴ There, Macdonald dealt mainly with farmers over matters like debt recovery, deed transfers, arrangement of wills, and other property transactions. This was also the nature of the work Macdonald performed from 1833 to 1836 when he took charge of his cousin Lowther Macpherson's legal practice in Prince Edward County.⁶⁵

Mackenzie was outgoing and politically active, so his protégé learned to be as well, joining civic clubs like the Celtic Society of Upper Canada, a secular organization for Scottish immigrants. Macdonald continued to follow Mackenzie's example by developing a public profile. Macdonald was secretary for both the Prince Edward Young Men's Society and the Prince Edward District School Board.⁶⁶ He also began speaking his mind. During a meeting at St. Andrew's Church in 1834, Macdonald moved that no religious restrictions be placed on enrolments for a proposed provincial university.⁶⁷

Mackenzie died suddenly in 1834, but Macdonald maintained his mentor's professional and political associations. Once he established his own law practice in 1835, Macdonald also took on many of Mackenzie's former clients. Since "much of his thinking about politics and law

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 44, 45, 69, 65.

⁶⁴ Lockhardt, "The Early Life of Macdonald," 17; see also H.R.S. Ryan, "John A. Macdonald the Young Lawyer," *Historic Kingston*, no. 36 (1987): 34.

⁶⁵ Teatero, "John A. Macdonald Learns," 107; see also Lockhardt, "The Early Life of Macdonald," 17. In 1833, Macpherson became ill and asked Macdonald to help him at his law office in Hallowell, Prince Edward County. Mackenzie agreed to let Macdonald go.

⁶⁶ Lockhardt, "The Early Life of Macdonald," 21; also, Ryan, "Macdonald the Young Lawyer," 34-35.

⁶⁷ Lockhardt, "The Early Life of Macdonald," 21, 50-51.

was formed under Mackenzie,” it is important to examine Mackenzie’s political ideas and interests.⁶⁸

Though Macdonald would continue to look in on Macpherson’s practice until 1836, he returned to Kingston in 1835 to open his own shop. From 1835, when he was twenty, to 1837, Macdonald practiced lucrative but tedious legal work such as chasing down unpaid bills and searching titles. Then in 1837 (probably to raise his profile) he changed the focus of his practice to criminal law, gaining prominence by defending the accused in sensational trials, including the famous case of Nils von Schoultz.⁶⁹ When the Upper Canada Rebellion began in December 1837, Macdonald demonstrated his loyalist credentials by enlisting in the Frontenac Militia.⁷⁰ Though it angered some Kingston residents, Macdonald’s decision to assist in the defence of some of the rebel prisoners, including von Schoultz, was based on the conviction that everyone was entitled to a defence.⁷¹ Macdonald also continued his civic engagement, serving as a returning officer in the 1838 municipal election.⁷²

Even as he pursued criminal law, Macdonald was becoming a corporation lawyer and moving into financial circles. By 1839 he was the solicitor for the Commercial Bank of the

⁶⁸ Teatero, “The Pre-Political Professional World of John A. Macdonald,” 72. Teatero was adamant that Macdonald had been the product of his environment: “It cannot be denied that Macdonald was created by the Kingston Scots community in the 1830’s with the careful guidance of George Mackenzie into a potentially moderating profession and in conjunction with a rising economic interest” (*Ibid.*, 87).

⁶⁹ Richard Gwyn, *John A.: The Man Who Made Us*, (Toronto: Vintage, 2008), 48-54.

⁷⁰ Ryan, “Macdonald the Young Lawyer,” 36; Lockhardt, “The Early Life of Macdonald,” 32.

⁷¹ Lockhardt, “The Early Life of Macdonald,” 41. Born in Finland, Nils von Schoultz (1807-1838) had a nomadic existence that eventually brought him to upstate New York in 1836. There he joined with a small group of other Americans who set themselves the task of “freeing” Canadians from British rule. Since he was the leader of the Americans’ failed raid, von Schoultz was the focus of much of the public condemnation. See Ronald J. Stagg, “SCHOULTZ, NILS VON,” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 7, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–, accessed October 30, 2018, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/schoultz_nils_von_7E.html.

⁷² Ryan, “Macdonald the Young Lawyer,” 36.

Midland District and had developed relationships with merchants throughout the province.⁷³ He joined the boards of directors of local companies and had begun real estate speculation.⁷⁴ Thus, he was firmly established as a businessman before becoming a politician.

Macdonald's Literary Tastes

Biographer Richard Gwyn observed that Macdonald's love of reading "came directly from the respect for knowledge that the Enlightenment implanted in all Scots."⁷⁵ While building his practice and public image, Macdonald maintained the love of extra-curricular reading he had demonstrated in childhood. This passion stayed with him throughout his life. Years later his private secretary, Joseph Pope, observed that no matter how busy, Macdonald "always found leisure for the gratification of his literary tastes, even if he had to take his books to bed with him."⁷⁶ From the time he began consuming the contents of the Macpherson library, Macdonald demonstrated that his tastes were "most catholic" (though apparently, he had a special affinity for lyrical poetry).⁷⁷

Later accounts from Macdonald and Pope bear this out. In 1845, Macdonald wrote his sister-in-law that he was reading, among other things, *The Bible in Spain* (1843), Thomas Carlyle's *Life of Schiller* (1825), the sermons of American Bishop Richard Moore, and Lord

⁷³ Teatero, "John A. Macdonald Learns," 103-04.

⁷⁴ J.K. Johnson, "John A. Macdonald and the Kingston Business Community," in *To Preserve and Defend: Essays on Kingston in the Nineteenth-Century*, ed. Gerald Tulchinsky, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1976), 141-55.

⁷⁵ Gwyn, *The Man Who Made Us*, 39.

⁷⁶ Sir Joseph Pope, *Memoirs of the Right Honourable Sir John Alexander Macdonald*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1894), 1:61.

⁷⁷ Lockhardt, "The Early Life of Macdonald," 13-14.

Mahon's *History of England* (1839).⁷⁸ Natural science was the only topic he avoided. Histories, biographies, philosophical tracts, and travel stories all appealed to Macdonald, as did constitutional works and political memoirs.⁷⁹ Walter Bagehot's *The English Constitution* (1867), the defining work on constitutional monarchy in a Westminster system of government, was required reading for any politician, but Macdonald especially enjoyed it, commenting that he thought Bagehot "the best authority on the British constitution."⁸⁰ Among political memoirs, one of Macdonald's favourites was Philip Stanhope's *Life of Pitt* (1861), a four-volume biography of Britain's eighteenth-century Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger.⁸¹

Macdonald had a strong interest in eighteenth-century British history. He had been captivated by depictions of its momentous events and heroic statesmen. Creighton said that Macdonald "was always culling absurdities" and other nuggets from biographies and histories written about the statesmen of that time.⁸² Macdonald was fond of quoting the maxim of the elder Pitt (the Earl of Chatham) that the first, second, and third requisites of a Prime Minister are patience.⁸³ Creighton suspected that Pitt the Elder may have been Macdonald's favourite statesman, since it was characteristic of Macdonald to appeal to Pitt's handling of government.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ Macdonald to Margaret Greene, November 15, 1845, in *Affectionately Yours: The Letters of Sir John A. Macdonald and His Family*, ed. J.K. Johnson, (Toronto: Macmillan, 1969), 40-41. Thomas Carlyle, *The Life of Friedrich Schiller, Comprehending an Examination of his Works*, (New York: American Publisher's Corporation, 1825); George Borrow, *The Bible in Spain*, (London: 1843); Philip Henry Stanhope, Earl, *History of England from the Peace of Utrecht to the Peace of Aix-La-Chapelle*, Vol. I, 2nd ed., rev. ed. (London: John Murray, 1839).

⁷⁹ Pope, *Memoirs*, 2:270.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 270-71. See Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution*, (London: Chapman and Hall, 1867).

⁸¹ Philip Henry Stanhope, Earl, *Life of the Right Honourable William Pitt*, 4 Vols., (London: John Murray, 1861).

⁸² Donald Creighton, *John A. Macdonald: The Old Chieftain*, (Toronto: Macmillan, 1955), 250.

⁸³ Pope, *Memoirs*, 2:281.

⁸⁴ Donald Creighton, *John A. Macdonald: The Young Politician*, (Toronto: Macmillan, 1952), 200-01.

Later in life Macdonald also repeatedly expressed his hope that he would, like Pitt, die in office and have to be carried from Parliament.⁸⁵

Macdonald's reading meant he could speak intelligently about the politics of Burke's time, and about Burke himself. In an 1845 speech defending the law of primogeniture, Macdonald spoke of Pitt the Younger and Burke's long-time friend and colleague Charles James Fox: "What would have been the younger Pitt and Fox if instead of being sent forth to seek their fortunes, the estates of their fathers had been divided?"⁸⁶ On another occasion, Macdonald reminded fellow parliamentarians that great men such as Burke and the Duke of Wellington had been pensioners.⁸⁷ After Macdonald's death, a Librarian of Parliament said that Macdonald had recounted to him a conversation he had had with Walter Bagehot years before in London, in which he explained to Bagehot his opinions "as to the reasons why the Whigs dealt ungratefully by Edmund Burke."⁸⁸

In terms of literature, Macdonald had loved lyrical poetry since childhood. Pope recalled how his friend had often enjoyed reciting from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Work Without

⁸⁵ Biggar, *Anecdotal Life of Macdonald*, 252. Here it may be pointed out that the evidence of Macdonald's reverence for Pitt the Elder is more explicit and solid than it is for Burke or any other statesman. However, as far as I have been able to determine, Macdonald's admiration of Pitt the Elder appears to have had more to do with Pitt's heroic status as the wartime leader who had steered Britain to victory in the Seven Years' War than any sense of shared principles or political philosophy. Even after a failed political comeback near the end of his life slightly tarnished his reputation, hagiographers ensured that he remained an iconic hero well into the nineteenth century. Politically, Pitt had spent most of his parliamentary career opposing Walpole's Court Whigs, though the opposition appears to have been based on Pitt's personal conflicts with Walpole and with King George II. Unlike Burke, Pitt was comfortable adjusting his principles to chase after political power. Also, as discussed above in Chapter One, Pitt elevated the quality of measures over men, while Burke's credo was just the opposite – men over measures.

⁸⁶ John A. Macdonald, "Defending Primogeniture," Speech to the House of Assembly. Montreal, Jan. 30, 1845, in *Debates of the Legislative Assembly of United Canada*, vol. 4, 1884-45.

⁸⁷ Biggar, *Anecdotal Life of Macdonald*, 119.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 306-07.

Hope.”⁸⁹ Macdonald probably read a lot of Sir Walter Scott as well since he similarly cited Scott’s work.⁹⁰ Among colonial authors, Thomas Chandler Haliburton’s popular and mocking satires, which revolved around the fictional exploits of Sam Slick, clearly had great appeal since Macdonald liked to quote from them in the House of Commons.⁹¹ In fact, Macdonald’s sense of humour was probably shaped in part by reading Haliburton, given that his sly and caustic wit mirrored Haliburton’s tone and substance. It has even been suggested that Macdonald took his famous line about being a “cabinet-maker” from a Sam Slick story.⁹²

Macdonald’s intellectual life was rooted in the long tradition of British history, politics, and culture. He was a reader of learned reviews and books, and thus a reasoning, theoretical conservative who grounded his beliefs on history and philosophy.⁹³ Like the great statesmen of the eighteenth century, he often demonstrated in debate the diversity of his learning. For example, in one exchange he drew on the Homeric tale of how Odysseus had navigated the treacherous straits between Scylla and Charybdis while also making a *double entente* that referred to the Roman dictator Sylla.⁹⁴ In another exchange he showed off his knowledge of the theatre when referring to “The Rivals,” a composition of British playwright and satirist Richard Brinsley Sheridan.⁹⁵ At the Quebec Conference, Macdonald would invoke Tocqueville, arguing

⁸⁹ Pope, *Memoirs*, 2:276.

⁹⁰ Macdonald to Mrs. Hugh Macdonald, March 3, 1842, in *Affectionately Yours*, ed. J.K. Johnson, 28-31.

⁹¹ Biggar, *Anecdotal Life of Macdonald*, 145.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 203. Famously, when Macdonald entered his name in a hotel ledger, under occupation he listed “cabinet-maker.”

⁹³ Creighton, *Young Politician*, 107.

⁹⁴ Biggar, *Anecdotal Life of Macdonald*, 140-41. While it is common today to use “double entendre” to convey a sense of double-meaning, in fact it is an English corruption of the original French expression “double entente.” Thus, Biggar appears to have been accustomed to the original form.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 146. Sheridan was also a Whig MP and thus a colleague of Burke’s.

that “all the failings prognosticated” by the latter about the errors of the U.S. constitution had been “shown to be fulfilled.”⁹⁶

Macdonald, then, may have indirectly encountered Burkean ideas through his reading. Haliburton, the “Sam Slick” author, had been raised in Loyalist Nova Scotia by parents with strong British Tory ties, and one literary historian was certain that Haliburton himself believed passionately in the political views of Edmund Burke. Fred Cogswell claimed that Haliburton had manifested Burkean ideas in his signature work, *The Clockmaker; or, The Sayings and Doings of Samuel Slick, of Slickville* (1836). Apparently, it depicted “an ideal of Nova Scotian life founded on Burkean principles.”⁹⁷ What’s more, Richard Sheridan had worked closely with Burke for years, especially during the impeachment of Warren Hastings, while Sir Walter Scott’s romances were “shot through and through with Burke’s convictions.”⁹⁸

Romantic poets Coleridge and William Wordsworth had been influenced by Burke, and they were two of the most important and celebrated figures in English literature in the early-nineteenth-century. Coleridge was “a major poet and one of the foremost critics,” and his “writings on religion, morals, and politics exerted a potent influence throughout the nineteenth century.”⁹⁹ Wordsworth was perhaps more renowned, especially in Macdonald’s time, since

⁹⁶ Macdonald, Quebec City, October 24, 1864, “Hewitt Bernard’s Notes on the Quebec Conference, 11-25 October, 1864,” in *Documents on the Confederation of British North America*, ed. G.P. Browne, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969), 124.

⁹⁷ Fred Cogswell, “Haliburton,” in *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*, 2nd ed., Vol. I, ed. Carl Klinck, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 98. Cogswell’s claim must be qualified, however, since it was analogous to Creighton et al. calling Macdonald “Burkean” in the same era.

⁹⁸ Kirk, *Genius Reconsidered*, 158.

⁹⁹ David Perkins, ed., *English Romantic Writers*, 2nd ed., (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1995), 500.

Coleridge died young in 1834 and Wordsworth became the United Kingdom's Poet Laureate.¹⁰⁰

Wordsworth's poetry evoked the Burkean view of nation. Specifically, Wordsworth had taken up Burke's position that tradition was essential to the nation, and like Burke, this put him at odds with the arid individualists of the eighteenth century.¹⁰¹ Wordsworth even composed a sonnet addressed to the "Genius of Burke."¹⁰² Coleridge was hostile to democracy for the same reason as Burke; namely, he doubted the political capacity of the average man. While Coleridge sometimes evinced a faith in human nature derived from the *philosophes* (whom Burke always detested), mostly he seems to have settled on the side of the "traditional Tory distrust of human nature."¹⁰³ On the relationship between legislation and human nature, Coleridge's thinking was "the very message of Burke."¹⁰⁴ Like him, Coleridge believed that legislation running counter to human nature was morally wrong.

Much of the literature and poetry produced in British North America in the early-nineteenth century was derivative of the British mainstream. The University of Toronto's Claude Bissell noted that the works of many of Canada's earliest poets of note, such as Charles Sangster (1822-1893) and Charles Mair (1838-1927), bore "the heavy imprint of their reading, so that a volume of their poetry resembles an anthology of Romantic and Victorian verse."¹⁰⁵ Canadian

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 265. Coleridge himself implied that Wordsworth was the greatest English poet since John Milton.

¹⁰¹ Alfred Cobban, *Edmund Burke and the Revolt Against the Eighteenth Century*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1929), 146-47. David Bromwich noted that Wordsworth and Matthew Arnold were two of the nineteenth-century's admirers of Burke. See David Bromwich, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 9.

¹⁰² See James D. Chandler, *Wordsworth's Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

¹⁰³ Cobban, *Edmund Burke and the Revolt Against the Eighteenth Century*, 169-70.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹⁰⁵ Claude T. Bissell, "Literary Taste in Central Canada During the Late Nineteenth Century," *Canadian Historical Review* 31, no. 3 (September 1950): 237. This point demonstrates the tendency of British North Americans in Macdonald's lifetime to absorb and reproduce the

literature would have imported many of the same ideas and beliefs found in the work of Coleridge, Wordsworth, and other British precursors.

Given that Macdonald was a voracious reader, he may have read Frances Brooke's romance, *The History of Emily Montague* (1769), one of the most popular novels in Canada well into the nineteenth-century.¹⁰⁶ The Burke connection here is that Frances Brooke was a friend of Burke's and they spent much time exchanging ideas together as members of Samuel Johnson's famous literary society. If something of Burke's thought shaped her own and made it into that celebrated novel, Macdonald may have absorbed it. Like so many of the Burkean strains in contemporary literature culture, however, the evidence is circumstantial and a direct transfer of intact, formative ideas from Burke to Macdonald cannot be established definitively. It brings to mind intellectual historian J.G.A. Pocock's anecdote about historian Freidrich Meinecke. Forced to admit there was no incontestable proof that Burke had read David Hume, Meinecke fell back on the untestable hypothesis that Hume's teachings had been "in the air" and infected Burke "as a species of influenza."¹⁰⁷

The Young Politician, 1844-1854

Macdonald entered the legislature of the Province of Canada in 1844 as the Tory party's representative for Kingston, but in fact his career in public office began a year earlier. In 1843, he was elected city alderman.¹⁰⁸ He was a popular choice because of his increased public profile

fashions of the imperial metropole.

¹⁰⁶ Coral Ann Howells and Eva-Marie Kroller, eds., *The Cambridge History of Canadian Literature*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 47.

¹⁰⁷ J.G.A. Pocock, "Burke and the Ancient Constitution – A Problem in the History of Ideas," *The Historical Journal* 3, no. 2 (1960): 126.

¹⁰⁸ Lockhardt, "The Early Life of Macdonald," 74.

and the professional and commercial connections he had cultivated. Arguably, the opinions of the business elites mattered most, since the franchise was still limited to propertied men.

It was characteristic of Macdonald in his formative years to demonstrate receptiveness to intellectual influences in his environment while avoiding either conservative or liberal extremes. More than one historian has observed how Macdonald's mind was especially malleable, and that his propensity for centrist compromise reflected his environment. Kingston historian Donald Swainson wrote that because of his malleability, Macdonald could just as easily have been a moderate Liberal.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, Lockhardt asserted that "possibly an environment other than Kingston, and friends other than the Macpherson set, would have made a Liberal out of him."¹¹⁰ It is fair to conclude, then, that even though Macdonald's politics were shaped partly in reaction to it, his "ethnic, regional and especially his professional background left him with strong predilections in 1844 when he was first elected to the provincial Legislature."¹¹¹

Yet just as Macdonald abhorred the ideological rigidity of Family Compact Tories, so he "could never have become the unyielding granite type" of Reformer like George Brown.¹¹² A practical Scots upbringing and a moderate temperament inclined him to seek a pragmatic "middle way" between political extremes.¹¹³ S.F. Wise even suggested that Macdonald's need to mediate and conciliate was the foundation of his politics. Macdonald's "most powerful political instinct," Wise wrote, was to "resolve clashing interests, and to find some form of satisfactory

¹⁰⁹ Donald Swainson, "Kingstonians in the Second Parliament: Portrait of an Elite Group," in *To Preserve and Defend: Essays on Kingston in the Nineteenth-Century*, ed. Gerald Tulchinsky, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1976), 263.

¹¹⁰ Lockhardt, "The Early Life of Macdonald," 44.

¹¹¹ Teatero, "The Pre-Political Professional World of Macdonald," 258.

¹¹² Lockhardt, "The Early Life of Macdonald," 44.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*; see also Swainson, "Kingstonians in the Second Parliament," 263. This was the opposite to Burke, who was by nature a partisan and could "scarcely understand neutrality." See Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 2:433.

compromise.”¹¹⁴ Thus, Macdonald would never be committed to either extreme, whether republicanism or Upper Canadian Toryism.¹¹⁵ He cared little for dogma, whether in religion or politics.¹¹⁶

Testing for Burke in the Pre-Confederation Macdonald

The discussion above consisted of reviewing circumstantial evidence that pointed to the influence of Burkean ideas in Macdonald’s environment. This section, using the Burkean test developed in Chapter Two, analyses a handful of public statements made by Macdonald early in his career as he developed his public persona. The section examines six instances in which, according to at least one criterion of the aforementioned test, it could be argued that he was Burkean because the views Macdonald expressed appeared to coincide with those of Burke.¹¹⁷

Note, however, that the application of the test is intentionally left incomplete in keeping with the circumstantial nature of this chapter’s theme and content. The point is to show how a cursory examination of Macdonald’s ideas could lead to the general supposition that he had Burkean credentials. In that way, it helps to explain how the Burkanadians’ claim could seem plausible provided one did not examine it too carefully.

In chronological order, the six instances examined include Macdonald’s statement in 1834 to a meeting at St. Andrew’s Church; his address to the electors of Kingston in 1844 when he accepted the Conservative Party nomination for a seat in the Legislative Assembly; his 1845

¹¹⁴ S.F. Wise, “John A. Macdonald: House of Commons Man,” *Historic Kingston*, no. 42 (1994): 56.

¹¹⁵ Teatero, “The Pre-Political Professional World of Macdonald,” 258.

¹¹⁶ Pope, *Memoirs*, 2:250.

¹¹⁷ To review, the test grouped Burke’s ideas under three broad themes which were a) aversion to abstract speculation, b) form and composition of government, and c) rights and freedoms in civil society. See above, Chapter Two.

defense of primogeniture; his support for repealing inherited usury laws in 1846; an 1853 speech preaching caution on reform; and his 1854 speech on what to do with the Clergy Reserves.¹¹⁸

As a nineteen-year-old, Macdonald put himself offside with many in Kingston's Presbyterian community when in 1834, he told a meeting at St. Andrew's Church that he believed religious affiliation should not pose a barrier to enrolment in the new college then being proposed. Eventually the new "Queen's College" (today's Queen's University) enshrined his sentiment in its charter, and students were not rejected if they were not Presbyterian.¹¹⁹

Macdonald's expression of religious toleration passes part three of the Burkean Test. Recall that Burke had often encouraged toleration of Protestant Dissenters and Catholics, arguing that it would strengthen Christianity because it was in keeping with the best spirit of its teachings.¹²⁰ Moreover, he said, even if one disagreed with that, toleration had proven itself a necessary social utility that safeguarded property and generally ensured political stability. Of course, it must be pointed out that the circumstances to which Macdonald and Burke directed their statements were very different. The proposal of a religious qualification for a university was a relatively minor example of intolerance compared to the persecution (which included draconian legal restrictions on inheriting and owning property, for example) of Protestant Dissenters and Catholics in eighteenth-century Britain.

In 1844, when Macdonald accepted his nomination as the candidate for the Conservative Party, he announced his general policy. He said it was of more consequence to develop provincial resources and improve upon its physical advantages "than to waste the time of the

¹¹⁹ Lockhardt, "The Early Life of Macdonald," 50-51.

¹²⁰ Burke, "Speech on the Relief of Protestant Dissenters, 1773," in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 372; Burke, "Tract on the Popery Laws, 1765," *Ibid.*, 255-72.

legislature and the money of the people in fruitless discussions on abstract and theoretical questions of government.”¹²¹ Here he expressed the practical politics he had learned from Mackenzie and other Scots.

Using the Burkean test, Macdonald’s 1844 statement of policy scores well under the first theme of aversion to abstract speculation, recalling Burke’s impatience with politicians who kept the House of Commons occupied with philosophical arguments based upon *a priori* reasoning that had little to no basis in historical experience. Politics was practical reason, not a logical theoretical construct. Better that governments and politicians base their thinking and actions in experience, and not in abstract truths deduced from first principles.¹²² For Burke “political philosophy was the practical art of governing man.”¹²³ Again, however, it can be argued that this is an example of cherry-picking from the historical record a case in which Macdonald took a position that fit with Burke’s political philosophy.

In January 1845, Reform leader Robert Baldwin urged the provincial legislature to abolish primogeniture, the ancient law which held that the whole of an estate, upon the death of the father, pass to the eldest son. Baldwin contended that the American example was fairer because it divided estates equally among all the surviving sons. Macdonald intervened to defend primogeniture, arguing that its repeal “ought not to be introduced here, for the very reason that it had been introduced into the United States.”¹²⁴ He also contended that repeal was “anti-British

¹²¹ The Reply of Mr. Macdonald to the Requisition of Two Hundred and Twenty-Five Electors, *The British Whig*, April 1844, quoted in Lockhardt, “The Early Life of Macdonald,” Appendix K.

¹²² Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*, 6th ed. (Chicago: Regnery, 1978), 20.

¹²³ Stanlis, Introduction to *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 33.

¹²⁴ Macdonald, “Defending Primogeniture,” January 30, 1845, in *Canada Transformed*, ed. Sarah Katherine Gibson and Arthur Milnes, 9.

and anti-Monarchical.”¹²⁵

Such reasoning was in line with the mainstream of conservative thought that Burke had contributed to and helped to define, and passes the first two criteria of the Burkean Test. Under the first criteria, there is a clear similarity between how Macdonald defended primogeniture on the historical basis of its proven social benefits and Burke’s general trust in the collected wisdom of centuries of experience, including his dictum that any institution with a long history and which had served reasonably well was worth keeping.

As Macdonald explained, the history of Britain showed that its youngest sons had always been at the forefront of its greatest achievements in peace and in war. While their elder brothers led comfortable and contented lives on inherited estates, the younger ones were driven out of necessity to achieve their own greatness. William Pitt the Younger and Charles Fox were excellent examples of younger sons who made their own names. They would never have reached the heights they did, Macdonald argued, if instead they had been “mere country squires.”¹²⁶ Macdonald’s implication was that Canada would be ignoring the lessons of history to its own detriment, preventing the rise of great men.

Macdonald’s intervention on behalf of primogeniture also included a rebuke of the American system. More than simple anti-American sentiment, Macdonald’s concern was explained by his belief that “the law of primogeniture was the great bulwark between the people and the Crown, and the Crown and the people.”¹²⁷ In this case, his remarks fit under the second theme of Burkeanism about the form and composition of government, recalling Burke’s emphasis upon maintaining a suitable constitutional balance between the people and their

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

government.

Moving on, Macdonald's 1846 address to the legislature, in which he proposed that Canada's usury laws should be repealed, is an example that works against the case for a Burkean influence. While usury – lending at unreasonably high rates of interest – was on the books as an illegal practice, the laws against it were not enforced, making it effectively legal. Generally pragmatic, Macdonald commented that he “could not understand how – when a theory was correct, the practice of that theory would not be correct also.”¹²⁸

Macdonald's comment offers a stark contrast to Burke's conciliatory approach to the American colonies seventy years earlier. The colonies had grown rebellious in part because Britain had attempted to enforce in practice its theoretical rights. Burke argued that Britain was correct, in principle, about its right to impose taxes, but he also warned that to exercise that right under the heated circumstances over the Stamp Act was imprudent. In that case, then, while the theory was correct, the practice of it, Burke said, was not.

In 1853, Macdonald voiced his concerns about parliamentary reform using language reminiscent of Burke. Advocates for increased democratic participation wanted more elected representatives, but Macdonald had learned to be cautious about institutional reform, arguing that “if there is one thing to be avoided, it is meddling with the constitution of the country, which should not be altered till it is evident that the people are suffering from the effects of that constitution as it actually exists.”¹²⁹ Burke had consistently argued that it was better to endure existing abuses than to invite new evils by imprudent tinkering.¹³⁰ Change, he said, must come

¹²⁸ Macdonald, “Challenging the Usury Laws,” April 27, 1846, in *Canada Transformed*, ed. Sarah Katherine Gibson and Arthur Milnes, 13.

¹²⁹ Macdonald, “Speech on the Representation Bill,” March 23, 1853, in *Canada Transformed*, ed. Sarah Katherine Gibson and Arthur Milnes, 43.

¹³⁰ Kirk, *Genius Reconsidered*, 98.

from the consequence of a need generally felt, and not from ideas conceived in speculation and not for the sake of change itself.¹³¹ Thus, Macdonald's statement scores well under the first theme of the test, being largely in agreement with Burke's thoughts on reform.

The final instance that will be examined here is from 1854, when Macdonald introduced and defended a bill on behalf of the government that ended the longstanding dilemma of what to do with the funds from the Clergy Reserves.¹³² In particular, he made two statements in the speech that align closely with different elements of the first section of the Burkean Test.

First, when challenged to defend the bill, Macdonald responded by pointing to public support for the measure and declaring "there is no maxim which experience teaches more clearly than this, that you must yield to the times. Resistance may be protracted until it produces revolution."¹³³ For all the reforms that Burke resisted in his career, he nevertheless acknowledged that, at some point, change was inevitable, admitting "we must all obey the great law of change."¹³⁴

Second, Macdonald also acknowledged in his speech that the expressed will of the people could not any longer be ignored, stating that "the people have determined it, the people will have

¹³¹ Kirk, *Conservative Mind*, 40.

¹³² The Clergy Reserves were lands in Canada that had been set aside by the British government in 1791 to maintain and support the Protestant Clergy. Over the next sixty years the Reserves proved to be a source of great conflict in the province. There were many disagreements, for example, over whether or not the endowment could or should be shared between the Church of England and other sects, such as the Presbyterians and Catholics. See, for example, Alan Wilson, *The Clergy Reserves of Upper Canada: A Canadian Mortmain*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968).

¹³³ Macdonald, "Yielding to the Times: Secular Clergy Reserves," November 2, 1854, in *Canada Transformed*, ed. Sarah Katherine Gibson and Arthur Milnes, 56.

¹³⁴ Burke to Sir Hercules Langrishe, in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 316. In fact, he had also suggested that change could be desirable if done properly and made after careful consideration.

it, and the people must have it.”¹³⁵ It was reminiscent of Burke’s maxim that redress of popular grievances was in the best interests of “gentlemen” and society, since ignoring the popular will for too long would stoke a feeling of hostility toward government and could possibly lead toward rebellion and revolution.¹³⁶ At some point, resistance to change ceased to be a principled stand and instead became merely factious opposition that brought government into disrepute.¹³⁷

While almost every one of the above examples passed at least some part of the Burkean Test, we must be wary of the “cherry-picking” fallacy in each case. Macdonald’s statements as a young politician may have only been talking points that served him to get elected and pass legislation, such as the Clergy Reserves bill, with which he may or may not have actually agreed.

A Reasonable yet Untested Hypothesis

The foregoing discussion has shown that there is enough evidence to suggest that Macdonald could have been a “man in the Burkean mould.”¹³⁸ That is, the claim warrants further

¹³⁵ Macdonald, “Yielding to the Times: Secular Clergy Reserves,” November 2, 1854, in *Canada Transformed*, ed. Sarah Katherine Gibson and Arthur Milnes, 57.

¹³⁶ Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 1:288.

¹³⁷ It is also worth noting here the contention by the editors of Macdonald’s collected speeches that “Edmund Burke best explains Macdonald’s view” of the appropriate role of the statesman, which was to be a representative, not a delegate (Sarah Katherine Gibson, Editor’s Note to *Canada Transformed: The Speeches of Sir John A. Macdonald*, xxxvii). Macdonald, for example, had apparently said in the House of Commons “we are representatives of the people, and not mere delegates” (Macdonald, quoted in Michael Bliss, *Right Honourable Men: The Descent of Canadian Politics from Macdonald to Mulroney*, (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1994), 11). There was no date given for Macdonald’s statement, and Bliss did not list where he found it. If true, it would have passed part two of the Burkean test. Famously, of course, Burke had told the electors of Bristol that “Parliament is not a congress of ambassadors” where members are to be bound blindly by “authoritative instructions” and “mandates issued”; such a view of the relationship between representatives and electors would be to fundamentally “mistake of the whole order and tenor of our constitution” (Edmund Burke, “Speech to the Electors of Bristol,” November 3, 1774, in *Best of Burke*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, 224).

¹³⁸ I am borrowing this phrase from Rod Preece. See Rod Preece, “The Political Wisdom of Sir John A. Macdonald,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 17, no. 3 (1984): 466.

examination. Strong circumstantial evidence from this phase of Macdonald's life points to a variety of ways in which he would have encountered Burkean ideas (or at the very least his general oeuvre). Notably, when Macdonald first entered Canada's Legislative Assembly, the political culture still revolved around the Court/Country Whig debates that Burke had such a large hand in shaping. In that sense, mainstream political thinking had a general Burkean character. Macdonald's formal education, his legal training, the books he read, and the culture in general would all, to varying degrees, have been part of this Burkean milieu.

What's more, it is possible to glimpse the influence in Macdonald's early political statements. These reflect a moderate conservative in the "British is best" tradition of earlier civic leaders Reverend Strachan and John Beverly Robinson (who were Burkean themselves). Young Macdonald promoted religious toleration and rejected abstraction in politics; he believed in the wisdom of history; and his approach to governing was to leave well enough alone if inherited legislation had served well. The sentiments he expressed about reform resembled the spirit of what Burke had said.

Admittedly, it is unclear if Macdonald was consciously positioning himself as a Burkean; possibly he may not have even been aware that he sometimes sounded like that celebrated statesman (though given Macdonald's intellect I believe that is unlikely). The next chapter examines whether Macdonald had a systematic pattern of thought based on Burke, or whether he had merely applied (like so many politicians of his era) such ideas selectively when it suited his purposes.

CHAPTER FOUR: LOOKING FOR BURKE IN MACDONALD'S CONFEDERATION PROJECT

Introduction

We have seen that the young Macdonald grew up in a political culture permeated by Burke's ideas and that some of his early public pronouncements as a politician pass the Burkean test. One caveat to this conclusion, however, is that these ideas were very much a part of the conventional wisdom of the political culture in which Macdonald grew up. It is impossible to say that Macdonald was a close student of Burke, that is to say, an apostle who studied Burke's writings closely and looked to Burke particularly for guidance in political affairs. Indeed, there is no evidence of Macdonald emulating Burke so closely. Now we turn to an examination of Macdonald as a mature politician during the critical decade of the 1860s that gave rise to the modern Canadian state.

This dissertation began with the proposition that if Canadian political culture was Burkean, then Burke's influence should be evident in the Confederation movement. Applying the Burkean test to Macdonald's words and actions, this chapter concludes that there is no clear and incontrovertible proof of the celebrated statesman's influence upon Macdonald.¹

This chapter has four parts. Part one discusses Macdonald's rise to political prominence in the 1850s and then describes his essential role in achieving Confederation. Since he was active in business as well as politics, his economic partnerships and financial interests are discussed. His personal attributes are scrutinised for what they reveal of his character. Two of Macdonald's

¹ As I explained above in the Introduction, Macdonald is the most logical proxy for Confederation thought since he was its chief architect and "the man who has been identified more than any other individual with the negotiations which preceded 1867 and with giving the resulting Confederation life and reality" in the years that followed, (Ian E. Wilson, "Sir John A. Macdonald in History," *Historic Kingston*, no. 41 (1993): 68).

political allies, George-Étienne Cartier and Thomas D'Arcy McGee, seemed to have been more influenced by Burkean ideas than Macdonald, so their influence upon Macdonald is examined.

Part two applies the Burkean test to Macdonald, the Charlottetown and Quebec City conferences, and the British North America Act, with an emphasis upon Macdonald's letters and speeches in the years 1857-1867, the period from when British North American union rose to the top of the political agenda in the Canadas to when the BNA Act went into effect July 1, 1867.²

A study of Macdonald's political correspondence reveals that he spent most of his time administering mundane matters of state. In this capacity, he was a thoughtful, practical administrator. His speeches, whether addressed to the Legislative Assembly of Canada, the House of Commons, or to the electorate during campaign season, made only general remarks about economic development and the benefits of British institutions. That was also the case for the statements he made in negotiations at Charlottetown and Quebec City.³

² G.P. Browne, Introduction to *Documents on the Confederation of North America*, ed. G.P. Browne, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969), xvi. Browne said the Confederation movement could be dated to Governor-General Sir Edmund Walker Head's announcement, in August 1858, that his ministry would open union discussions with the Maritime provinces and the Imperial government.

³ The reader will see that, for the most part, I cite from edited collections of Macdonald's letters and speeches. The two-volume compilation of letters edited by J.K. Johnson and C.B. Stelmach was more conveniently accessible to the modern eye than the digitized collection at Library and Archives Canada since the latter is in his hand-writing, which is laborious to decipher. That said, I examined the vast majority of the digitized originals for each year of 1857-67 and found the Johnson and Stelmach volumes to be representative. See *Letters of Sir John A. Macdonald: 1836-1857*, Vol. I, and *Letters of Sir John A. Macdonald: 1858-1861*, Vol. II, ed. J.K. Johnson and C.B. Stelmach, (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1968-1969). My principle source for Macdonald's speeches is the recently published *Canada Transformed*, edited by Sarah Katherine Gibson and Arthur Milnes. It contains what are generally recognized as the most significant speeches of Macdonald's career, both in terms of their impact and for what they reveal about the philosophical origins of his thinking. See *Canada Transformed: The Speeches of Sir John A. Macdonald*, ed. Sarah Katherine Gibson and Arthur Milnes, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2014). However, I have also relied upon first-hand reports from Hewitt Bernard, John Hamilton Gray, and Edward Whelan. Bernard was the official minute taker for the Charlottetown and Quebec conferences, while Gray and Whelan were both participants in the conferences who

It cannot be demonstrated that Macdonald was primarily influenced in any definitive way by Burke. Unlike his friend McGee, he did not express in certain terms that he was guided by one thinker or statesman more than another. Nor does the Burkean test produce a definitive conclusion. Macdonald sometimes echoed Burke in word or action, but no more frequently or enthusiastically than he borrowed from other parts of the British political and philosophical tradition. In fact, he mentioned the Pitt prime ministers more than he mentioned Burke by name. Since it cannot be demonstrated that Macdonald was particularly Burkean, the claim that through him Burkeanism informed Confederation, and therefore Canadian political culture, is unsubstantiated.

Part three of the chapter discusses some limits of the intellectual history approach. For one, there is the problem of immanent ideology. Much of the tradition Macdonald was working within was taken for granted, so ideas and their origins were left unarticulated. In other words, just because Macdonald did not specifically state, as McGee had, his commitment to Burkean principles, does not prove the absence of influence. Two, if on occasion Macdonald may have articulated ideas that suggested such an influence, it still is difficult to determine whether he was knowingly drawing from Burke since political phraseology was littered with the latter's aphorisms. Was Macdonald aware of that? What was his understanding of Burke? Did he have a thorough understanding of the Court-Country debate, and position himself in relation to it? Or was he inclined, like Utilitarians, to reduce Burke's thought to the values of prudence and

recorded verbatim accounts of what was said by attendees. See "Hewitt Bernard's Notes on the Quebec Conference, 11-25 October, 1864," in *Documents on the Confederation of British North America*, ed. G.P. Browne, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969), 93-126; John Hamilton Gray, *Confederation: Or, the Political and Parliamentary History of Canada*, Vol. I, (Toronto: Copp, Clark & Co., Printers, King St. East, 1872); and Hon. Edward Whelan, *The Union of the British Provinces*, (Gardenvale, Quebec: Garden City Press, 1927).

pragmatism?

The chapter ends by discussing how the historical, geographical, and economic distance between Burke and Macdonald mitigated against any direct application of the former's positive prescriptions in the latter's context. In economic policy, for example, Macdonald had little choice but to continue pursuing infrastructure expansion through public subsidies. Without them, private enterprises, even those loyal to Britain, would either fail or relocate to the United States, and creditors would call in debts, bankrupting the public treasury. The likelihood is that it would simply not have been possible for Macdonald to operate according to a Burkean system, let alone impose it upon the polity.

Macdonald Biography – The Confederation Years, 1857-1867

Macdonald had started out as a businessman-lawyer-politician in the 1830s, following in the footsteps of his mentor George Mackenzie. Yet a young lawyer such as Macdonald probably would have ended up in politics and business anyway because all three professions were “inextricably bound together.”⁴ Personal and political fortunes were tied to commercial expansion and economic development. Macdonald was a Kingston entrepreneur with a transatlantic outlook. His speech accepting the Conservative nomination in 1844 had repeated the mantra of the times - the “business of politics was development.”⁵ The focus was on attracting investment for railways and road building, which would then lead to more economic development, which would attract more investment... and so on in a virtuous cycle of ongoing progress. Macdonald was a liberal capitalist in an age dominated by industrialization, the rise of

⁴ William Teatero, “A Dead and Alive Way Never Does: The Pre-Political Professional World of John A. Macdonald,” master's thesis, Queen's University, 1978, 253.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 255-56.

big business, and urbanization.⁶

By 1857, he had become one of the most enterprising commercial lawyers in Upper Canada. While political connections aided his business career, “he would have occupied a prominent position in Kingston’s affairs even if he had never had a political career at all.”⁷ He and his law firm were invested widely, with significant outlays in railways, steamships, and road companies. Most of the investment, however, was directed to speculation in Upper Canadian real estate, including at least three local subdivisions and an almost constant series of smaller purchases and sales. He held directorships in seven companies, including the Commercial Bank of the Midland District, the Trust and Loan Company of Upper Canada, and the Cataraqui and Peterborough Railway Company.⁸

Though he had first been sent to the Canadian Legislative Assembly in 1844 as a Tory, Macdonald was from the start a moderate conservative. He naturally gravitated to the moderate William Henry Draper, who became his political mentor. That was consistent with the tradition of George Mackenzie, who had carried the banner of moderate, or liberal, conservatism.⁹ Historian H.R.S. Ryan said that Macdonald at first spoke infrequently in the Assembly, keeping quiet while studying parliamentary procedures. In May 1847, Macdonald’s appointment as the Receiver-General for the province marked a turning point in his career in legal practice. It meant an exclusive focus on politics while trusting the day-to-day operation of his firm to partners.¹⁰

⁶ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁷ J.K. Johnson, “John A. Macdonald the Kingston Business Community,” in *To Preserve and Defend: Essays on Kingston in the Nineteenth-Century*, ed. Gerald Tulchinsky, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1976), 152.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 141, 148-52.

⁹ William R. Teatero, “John A. Macdonald Learns – Articling with George Mackenzie,” *Historic Kingston*, no. 27 (1979): 106.

¹⁰ H.R.S. Ryan, “John A. Macdonald the Young Lawyer,” *Historic Kingston*, no. 36 (1987): 39.

Macdonald was re-elected in 1848, though the Tory government was defeated. 1848 was the landmark election in which the English Reformers and French *Rouges*, led by Robert Baldwin and Louis-Hippolyte Lafontaine, respectively, formed a majority coalition on the basis of establishing responsible government (among other reforms).¹¹ Draper had retired, so while in opposition Macdonald began building his own network of politicians and businessmen. He gathered around him figures such as Ogle Gowan and John Rose who would later be useful political allies.¹²

By the close of the 1840s many Tories in Canada were frustrated and angry about decisions made in London which had cost them their privileged economic status and their control of the colonial government. In 1846, Britain's decision to adopt an economic policy of free trade meant that Canadian business no longer had cheaper access than its American competitors to British markets. Moreover, Reform co-premiers Baldwin and Lafontaine had democratized the executive branch, eliminating the veto power that executive councils had historically relied upon to block popular measures passed in the elected assembly. They had done so with the blessing of the Crown's representative, Governor General Lord Elgin, whose cooperation with their reforms signalled the arrival of responsible government in the Canadas.

When the Baldwin-Lafontaine government passed the *Rebellion Losses Bill*, it was the

¹¹ The Parti rouge was a political party that emerged in the late 1840s in Canada East. It was the successor to the tradition of Louis-Joseph Papineau's Parti patriote, which had disappeared after the defeat of the 1837-38 Rebellions in Quebec. The party advocated for universal suffrage, an elected Legislative Council, and the separation of Church and State. It was the Canada East counterpart to George Brown's Clear Grits in Canada West. See Jean-Paul Bernard, *Les Rouges: libéralisme, nationalisme et anticléricalisme au milieu du XIXe siècle*, (Montréal: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1971), and Yvan Lamonde, *Histoire sociale des idées au Québec*, (Saint-Laurent, Québec: Fides, 2000).

¹² Richard Gwyn, *John A.: The Man Who Made Us*, (Toronto: Vintage, 2008), 112-14.

last straw for the Tories, who regarded it as a reward for traitors.¹³ Enraged by their loss of political power and economic advantage, radical Tories set fire to the Parliament buildings in Montreal, burning them to the ground. Then they petitioned for immediate annexation to the United States.¹⁴

Macdonald, in contrast, committed to strengthening the British connection in the wake of these developments. In Kingston, he helped to convene a meeting of the new British America League (though he did not speak at the meeting). Those assembled unanimously rejected annexation and resolved that Canada should make the best of things by trying to negotiate an economic reciprocity agreement with the U.S.¹⁵ That resolution bore Macdonald's imprint in that it steered a middle way at a moment of crisis rather than panicking and clutching at extreme expedients.

Macdonald was re-elected again in 1851. The old guard of Conservatives continued to pass out of politics, either through retirement or death, and the party's hopes increasingly rested on the new generation of moderates that included Macdonald. Since he had some seniority and had served (if only briefly and in the relatively minor post of Receiver-General) in a government ministry, Macdonald was regarded as one of the leaders of the Conservative Party.

He reformed the party in three ways. First, he made it a centrist party by discarding what was left of hardline, Family Compact Tories. Second, he made it a national party by forging alliances with French-Canadian members from Lower Canada. The productive cooperation of

¹³ That bill provided compensation to Lower Canadians whose property had been vandalized or destroyed during the 1837-38 rebellions in the province. It angered Tories who believed it was rewarding Lower Canadians for disloyalty.

¹⁴ See, for example, George M. Wrong, *The Earl of Elgin*, (Toronto: G.N. Morang, 1906), and J.J. Bell, "The Burning of the Parliament Buildings," *The Canadian Magazine* 20, no.6 (April, 1903): 501-07.

¹⁵ Gwyn, *Man Who Made Us*, 117.

Baldwin and Lafontaine showed that the Conservatives could not remain English-only if they were to have any chance at holding power. Third, the party would use patronage to reward supporters and attract newcomers.¹⁶ These were hardly original ideas. Rather, the Conservatives were imitating the Reform Party's formula for success.

The 1854 election produced mixed results. Macdonald's Conservatives won the third-most seats, yet because the Reform Party was split, Conservatives formed a coalition with moderate Reformers (radical Reformers, upset with the tepid pace of change, formed the opposition). The Conservatives were better-organized and took control of the ministry. Sir Allan MacNab, an old Tory who had begun his political career in 1830, was made the nominal head of the administration, while Macdonald, appointed Attorney-General, worked with Cartier to set the course of the government. By 1857, the two were co-premiers, with Macdonald continuing his work as Attorney General and as Conservative Party organizer and manager in Canada West (while Cartier similarly attended to Canada East).

By this point Macdonald's political motivation and his *modus operandi* were obviously settled. The previous chapter's analysis of his early political statements revealed a drive to get things done. His particular focus was building infrastructure for economic development, but in general he also wanted to find practical, bipartisan solutions to policy problems. To that end, he was usually prepared to abandon his own preferences. On many questions, such as the merits of an elected Senate, or the provision of separate schools, Macdonald had opinions but was not bound to them. A.R.M. Lower said it was "hard to see Macdonald as consistently arrayed on the one side or the other in respect to them."¹⁷ Macdonald was neither romantic, nor moralistic, but

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 124-25.

¹⁷ A.R.M. Lower, "Sir John Macdonald," *Historic Kingston*, no. 30 (1981): 66.

rather “very much down to earth,” and soldiered on in pursuit of his overriding goals despite numerous setbacks.¹⁸

In that way Macdonald had a Utilitarian strain, as T.W.L. MacDermot had observed.¹⁹ For example, although he abhorred most features of American institutions, Macdonald would have set aside his distaste for nomination conventions (an American invention) if it meant pliable candidates similarly willing to ditch ideology and provide reliable votes in the Assembly.²⁰

Macdonald’s work as Attorney General and as party leader in the 1850s further reveal the assumptions that underlay his general mode of action as a public man. He thought the criminal justice system sound, but when administering it he erred on the side of mercy and rehabilitation rather than punishment. He was generally a very humane judge of transgressors, and intervened when he thought it necessary to reduce sentences. He was also ahead of his time in suggesting female-only correctional institutions.²¹ H.R.S. Ryan’s assessment fits - Macdonald “was not a great innovator in legal matters,” but he “was not opposed to reform when convinced that it was necessary.”²² That is, Macdonald’s approach was to leave things as they were unless he saw a clear need for change. In that case, he sometimes proposed reforms himself.

It is not true (as MacDermot and so many others have claimed) that Macdonald was not a man of ideas.²³ Rather, it was just that many of his ideas and attitudes “were innate . . . often

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁹ T.W.L. MacDermot, “The Political Ideas of John A. Macdonald,” *Canadian Historical Review* 14, no. 3 (1933): 258.

²⁰ J.K. Johnson, Introduction to *Letters of Sir John A. Macdonald: 1858-1861*, Vol. II, ed. J.K. Johnson and C.B. Stelmach, (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1969), xii-xiii.

²¹ *Ibid.*, xi.

²² Ryan, “John A. Macdonald the Young Lawyer,” 39.

²³ MacDermot, “The Political Ideas of John A. Macdonald,” 263. MacDermot based this claim on Macdonald’s repeated assertions that he would not discuss abstract principles. Macdonald had ideas and was well-versed in politics and history (as I showed in Chapter Three).

unarticulated, precepts that were largely formed prior to his entering public life.”²⁴ Like most politicians (especially conservatives) of his time, Macdonald only occasionally made explicit his own precepts or ideological and cultural reference points; thus, when in March, 1880, Macdonald eulogized his friend Luther Holton with a quote from Burke, it was “a philosophical moment unusual with him.”²⁵ Instances like that were uncommon, and when they did occur, they did not have a single source. Like so many others, Macdonald would cite the standard authorities and the grand names in the British tradition, sometimes looking to Burke, and other times to Charles Fox and either of the Pitts.²⁶

However, some features of Macdonald’s politics did recall Burke. For one, Macdonald’s early experiences as a Scot meant he understood the minority psychology and was sympathetic to minority points of view.²⁷ Some Scots held prominent positions in government and business, but in British North America they were still “a small, threatened people.”²⁸ The Scottish Gaelic language was mocked, and it was suppressed by the English. What is more, his father’s repeated business failures would have stigmatized Macdonald’s family as barely respectable. In these ways Macdonald had much in common with the Irish and the French Canadians in British North America. Similar to the Irish, the Scots had also suffered from centuries of English

²⁴ Teatero, “The Pre-Political Professional World of Macdonald,” 258.

²⁵ P. B. Waite, *Canada, 1874-1896: Arduous Destiny*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1971), 100. For Macdonald’s speech, see *Canada: House of Commons, Debates*, p. 651, (March 15, 1880). Macdonald quoted Burke’s expression “what shadows we are, and what shadows we pursue.”

²⁶ Gordon Stewart, *The Origins of Canadian Politics: A Comparative Approach*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1986), 12; see also Carl Berger, *The Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 103.

²⁷ Lower, “Sir John Macdonald,” 64.

²⁸ Gwyn, *Man Who Made Us*, 130. Gwyn said that when Macdonald looked at Lower Canada, he undoubtedly saw Scotland.

misgovernment and maltreatment.²⁹ Like the French Canadians, Scots faced the loss of their language. Macdonald would always be a strong advocate for French-Canadian linguistic and religious protection.³⁰ One of the last questions he spoke to before his death was the proposed abolition of French Language instruction in Manitoba schools. Macdonald opposed abolition, and echoed Gladstone's recent defense of Welsh and Maltese rights to preserve their languages and institutions. Macdonald said that the French in Canada were no different.³¹

Those who witnessed Macdonald in action testified that the "great power of sympathy" was in fact his chief political talent.³² His ability to relate to others inspired unparalleled devotion from followers and even enabled him to draw political opponents to his side. His private secretary Pope reflected that "almost every leading man who had begun political life as his opponent ended by being his colleague and friend."³³ D'Arcy McGee, for example, had initially disliked Macdonald. Driven by a "powerful political instinct" for diplomacy, Macdonald brought people together.³⁴ This was how he would build the political consensus for Confederation.

Where Burke had railed against others for their sins (i.e. for not measuring up to his lofty standards), Macdonald saw no point in venting his anger. He was a realist.³⁵ He accepted the need to work with the materials at hand.³⁶ His first cabinet as Prime Minister of Canada was a

²⁹ Pope, *Memoirs*, 2:221.

³⁰ Pope, *Memoirs*, 2:249. Of course, his advocacy was also a pragmatic calculation to secure necessary support in Quebec for his liberal-conservative coalition.

³¹ *Ibid.* A copy of that Gladstone speech was found in Macdonald's desk after his death. It also reaffirms that Macdonald was catholic in who he looked to for ideological reference points.

³² Pope, *Memoirs*, 2:294. Pope said that sympathy was "the chiefest of his gifts."

³³ Pope, *Memoirs*, 1:184.

³⁴ S.F. Wise, "John A. Macdonald: House of Commons Man," *Historic Kingston*, no. 42 (1994): 56.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 55. Wise said that Macdonald "looked at life realistically."

³⁶ As explained in Chapter Two (above), Burke had also been a realist about human nature, and had advocated policies that channeled moral weaknesses, like selfishness, to social goods, like general prosperity. Yet Burke seems to have had room for the flaws of human nature only among

good example. He would have preferred statesmanlike colleagues of enlarged and learned views, but most colonial politicians were petty, self-interested, and, if not bigoted, then deeply distrustful of the “Other.”³⁷

Macdonald understood that effective government of a racially and linguistically diverse people with different interests often required a leader to submit to compromise. Setting aside certain principles, the leader, “if he cannot order all things exactly as he might wish . . . must be content to have them proceeding as far in the right direction as circumstances permit.”³⁸ It was a lesson he appeared to have accepted with greater ease than Burke, who could never bring himself to stop expressing disappointment that the world was not ordered as he wished. Macdonald’s oft-repeated mantra was “we must take people as we find them.”³⁹

Even-tempered and open-minded, Macdonald had a “cosmopolite largeness of spirit,” and was “adaptable” (which, in the parlance of the times, meant he lacked strong convictions).⁴⁰ These qualities allowed him to remain above the sectarian disputes between English and French, Protestant and Roman Catholic, etc. To him, politics was a means to accomplish his transcendent goals, economic development and nation-building. Jealousies and prejudices interfered with real priorities. Despite a history of significant policy differences and personal tensions, for example, he had recommended Alexander Tilloch Galt for High Commissioner, explaining that he would

the masses – he did not tolerate such failings in public leaders, and often voiced criticism of opponents and allies alike when they did not measure up to his own moral standards. That was a difference between Burke and Macdonald.

³⁷ Pope, *Memoirs*, 1:331.

³⁸ Pope, *Memoirs*, 1:151.

³⁹ Macdonald to Captain Strachan, Kingston, February 9, 1854, in Pope, *Memoirs*, 1:102-04.

⁴⁰ E.B. Biggar, *Anecdotal Life of Sir John Macdonald*, (Montreal: John Lovell & Son, 1891), 262. Biggar is citing the opinion of a writer in the *Toronto World*.

not gratify personal resentments by not picking the best man for the job.⁴¹

Historians as different as Kenneth McNaught and Graeme Mercer Adam believed that Macdonald was a politician for the right reasons. McNaught said that Macdonald was not in politics for the sake of power itself.⁴² Adam claimed Macdonald had a “disinterested devotion to the interests of his country” that recalled Burke’s preferred class of statesman.⁴³ While Macdonald was invested in railways and other enterprises, that was common for politicians at the time. He could have exploited his position for great wealth, yet “throughout his long public life . . . he never used it to enrich himself.”⁴⁴ He had possessed “unparalleled facilities for amassing wealth” but died comparatively poor.⁴⁵ Pope said Macdonald once refused a cash gift from a friend because the latter had formerly been a government contractor.⁴⁶ In 1867, Macdonald precipitated personal bankruptcy because as head of the government he refused to aid the Commercial Bank (to which his legal firm was heavily indebted).⁴⁷

Of course, we must be critical of these claims. They were made either by those, like

⁴¹ Pope, *Memoirs*, 2:282. Macdonald also set aside resentment for George Brown when he needed the latter to secure the Reform Party’s support for Confederation.

⁴² Kenneth McNaught, “Sir John A. Macdonald and the Idea of Canada,” *Historic Kingston*, no. 39 (1991): 11-14. McNaught said Macdonald was not interested in “mere retention of office.”

⁴³ Graeme Mercer Adam, *Canada’s Patriot Statesman: The Life and Career of the Rt. Hon. Sir John A. Macdonald*, (London: McDermid & Logan: 1891), x. Such tributes proliferated after Macdonald’s death. In 1893, prime minister Sir John Thompson said that “unselfishness and devotion to duty are among Sir John’s highest characteristics.” See Pope, *Memoirs*, 2:347. Burke had said landed aristocrats made the best governors because they had no need to enrich themselves at the public expense, and thus could act in the best long-term interests of the people.

⁴⁴ Adam, *Canada’s Patriot Statesman*, xviii.

⁴⁵ Biggar, *Anecdotal Life of Sir John Macdonald*, 305. That was the reflection of prime minister J.J. Abbott, who also said that not even Macdonald’s enemies could accuse him “of using his political power for personal advantage” (*Ibid.*). That last point was debatable. Did retaining political power qualify as personal advantage?

⁴⁶ Pope, *Memoirs*, 2:252.

⁴⁷ Donald Swainson, “Kingstonians in the Second Parliament: Portrait of an Elite Group,” in *To Preserve and Defend: Essays on Kingston in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Gerald Tulchinsky, (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1976), 275.

Pope, Thompson, and Abbott, who knew and loved Macdonald, by those like Adam and Biggar who were celebrating Macdonald in his lifetime, or by sympathetic historians like McNaught writing at the high point of Canadian nationalism. They all had good reasons for wanting to depict Macdonald in the best possible light.

The 1873 Pacific Scandal is probably the most obvious counter to claims that Macdonald's politics were "above board." Briefly, that scandal revolved around Sir Hugh Allan's contribution of more than three-hundred-thousand dollars to Macdonald's Conservative Party for the 1872 election. Not long after the Conservatives were returned with another majority, Allan, a shipping and railway magnate, was granted the contract to construct the Canadian Pacific Railway. Macdonald's infamous telegram to Allan requesting "another ten thousand" sealed public condemnation, forcing his ministry to step down. The scandal ranks among the worst examples of political corruption in Canadian history.⁴⁸

Moreover, it is hard to reconcile the claim that Macdonald did not seek power in and of itself when he seems to have so clearly enjoyed its exercise. What McNaught and others may have meant was that Macdonald did not value power as an end in itself, but rather as a means by which to advance his nation-building agenda. If he enjoyed his work, that was a reasonable trade-off for foregoing the personal enrichment that business and the law would have provided.

Macdonald *was* perpetually preoccupied with financial insecurity. Just a few years after

⁴⁸ Richard Gwyn, *Nation Maker*, (Toronto: Random House, 2011), 205-08. Yet that scandal must be placed in the proper historical context. As Gwyn explains, few Canadians at the time were troubled by patronage; it was standard operating procedure. Indeed, it had been one of the tools used to cement support for Confederation, particularly in New Brunswick. What appeared to have roused public furor was the sheer scale of wealth and power involved. For more on the Pacific Scandal, see A.A. Den Otter, "Nationalism and the Pacific Scandal," *Canadian Historical Review* 69, no. 3 (September 1988): 315-39, and on public opinion regarding corruption in Canadian politics, see William J. Stairs, "Political Corruption and Public Opinion: The Evolution of Political Ethics in Canada, 1840-1896," Ph.D. diss., Université Laval, 1991.

starting his legal career his father passed away, and Macdonald was forced to support his mother and two sisters. Marriage to his first wife Isabella in 1844 meant additional expenses. Politics did not pay as well as the law, so neglect of his legal practice hurt. Plus, Macdonald made notoriously bad investments.⁴⁹ He also incurred heavy expenses treating his first wife's chronic illness. In 1848, when Macdonald rented Kingston's Pekoe Pagoda for Isabella and their newborn son, he was paying for doctors, nurses, and rent. Creighton said that "he was probably spending up to the limit of his income."⁵⁰

Though Macdonald remained committed to the political life despite its frequent headaches and his own financial trouble, he was often accused of being indifferent or unprincipled.⁵¹ Macdonald's chronic alcoholism probably had a lot to do with the charge, but it was also because he rarely took things too seriously. Graeme Mercer Adam said that "no one could be more joyous, more amusing, more apparently careless in anecdote, in expression, in quotation" than Macdonald.⁵² Macdonald was the "laughing Celtic highlander" who viewed the world around him as a human comedy.⁵³ It was part of his charm. It should also be noted that those who accused Macdonald of lacking principles were ideologues on the right and the left.

⁴⁹ Gwyn, *Man Who Made Us*, 110-11. In this way, too, he was similar to Burke, but this does not make him Burkean in his political philosophy. It could be argued that Macdonald's bad investments were a result of his getting immersed in politics and losing the business sense he had displayed early in his career.

⁵⁰ Creighton, *Young Politician*, 132.

⁵¹ Biggar, *Anecdotal Life of Sir John Macdonald*, 255. This charge was also frequently levelled against Burke. He was, for example, accused of abandoning his principles for the sake of an office and pension when he sided with Europe's monarchies during the French Revolution. But again, similarities such as these between Macdonald and Burke are no basis for claiming that Macdonald was Burkean in his politics.

⁵² Adam, *Canada's Patriot Statesman*, 562. Elsewhere, Adam said that Macdonald's dealings with others "hardly led them to regard him as quixotically rigid in his principles, or of austere morals" (*Ibid.*, viii).

⁵³ Cynthia M. Smith and Jack McLeod, Introduction to *Sir John A.: An Anecdotal Life of John A. Macdonald*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1989), xi.

They had more respect for hardliners than politicians who steered a middle way.

Unlike Burke, Macdonald was not known for reliable metaphors or sweeping oratory. Rather, he was a plodding yet intelligent speaker who won over audiences with wit, charm and a magnetic physical presence. Pope wrote “without pretension to oratory . . . the intimate knowledge of public affairs, joined to keen powers of argument, humour and sarcasm, the ready wit, the wealth of illustration and brilliant repartee, gave to his speeches set off as they were by a striking presence and singularly persuasive style, a potency which was well-nigh irresistible.”⁵⁴

The Confederation Project

By the early 1860s it had become clear that the Union of the Canadas was no longer tenable. George Brown’s Clear Grits opposed moderate Reformers in Upper Canada, reducing their numbers in the legislature, and there was little the Grits could agree upon with their Lower Canadian counterparts, the *Parti rouge*. Meanwhile, the Macdonald-Cartier coalition was weakening and susceptible to defections during critical votes. No party could command majority support in the legislature for any significant length of time.

Perhaps the most difficult sticking point was the question of representation by population. Brown had long been a strong advocate, and Macdonald, sensing its inevitability, agreed it was necessary. Lower Canadians, however, were steadfastly opposed. Since the union in 1841, Upper Canada’s population had exploded while Lower Canada’s had grown more slowly. If seats in the assembly were apportioned to each province based on population, then the French would be at the mercy of an English majority that continued to grow.

One proposal called for a restructuring of the province under a federal scheme that

⁵⁴ Pope, *Memoirs*, 1:183.

would create two levels of government. It would involve shared responsibility for military defence, for example, but delegate cultural and other local matters to new provincial governments. News of similar discussions among the Maritime colonies had spread to Canada, and Macdonald, Brown, and other Canadian leaders travelled to Charlottetown in 1864 to propose the larger union of all British North American colonies.

Famously, Macdonald had long resisted federal schemes, believing that, eventually, economic growth would alleviate tensions and that French-Canadians would slowly abandon their language and religion if English-Canadians encouraged their integration. Moreover, federalism was an American invention, and thus suspect. Yet as Canada's disputes remained intractable despite the best efforts of all parties, he came around to Confederation. Once he did, it became Macdonald's only real objective in politics. After 1867, all of his efforts, including, most notably, the Canadian Pacific Railway, would be directed to strengthening the project.

Cartier marshalled support in Quebec, Galt did the finances, and Brown, Tilley, and Tupper were critical to success, but Macdonald was always the unquestioned leader of the Confederation project. His hand is to be seen everywhere in that movement, including the crucial collaboration with George Brown that ensured opposition support, in convincing reluctant Maritime politicians to support it, and in his skillful promotion of the plan to the British authorities.⁵⁵

What's more, the new constitution was mostly drafted by him. As Macdonald apparently said to James Gowan after the Quebec Conference, "I have no help, not one man of the Conference (except Galt on finance) had the slightest idea of constitution making. Whatever is

⁵⁵ Wise, "House of Commons Man," 55-56.

good or ill in the Constitution is mine.”⁵⁶

Macdonald’s confidantes as well as his partners in nation-building reinforced whatever parts of the Burkean tradition were still circulating. For one, D’Arcy McGee was a self-declared devotee of his fellow Irishman’s political ideas, writing to a friend, for instance, “of late I have read and re-read him [Burke], till I think that I may say, I know all that we, and the Empire, owe him.”⁵⁷ As previously mentioned, McGee told his constituents that he considered himself the successor to Burke’s legacy: “in walking this path, I am in the right line of succession with all the illustrious Irish statesmen of the past, O’Connell . . . and above all, Burke.”⁵⁸ Unlike most who traded on Burke’s name, McGee was well-versed in his subject, having delivered lectures on the statesman.⁵⁹ Historian David Wilson, an expert on McGee, explained how the latter had come to embrace “Burke’s emphasis on compromise within a liberal-conservative consensus,” as well as the “uncompromising attitude to all forms of religious and nationalist extremism.”⁶⁰ In fact, Wilson said, the two were kindred spirits.⁶¹

Cartier’s working relationship and friendship with Macdonald was longstanding and lasted until the former’s death in 1873. Though Cartier and Macdonald were distinctly different

⁵⁶ Macdonald, to Ogle Gowan, in J.K. Johnson, Introduction, Part Two: 1858-1878, in *Affectionately Yours: the Letters of Sir John A. Macdonald and His Family*, ed. J.K. Johnson, (Toronto: Macmillan, 1969), 85. According to Johnson, Macdonald said this to Gowan “after the Quebec Conference,” but Johnson does not have a footnote for the quotation. I could not find it in Macdonald’s letters to Gowan. Regardless, the sentiment fits with the historical record of Macdonald’s contribution to the Confederation negotiations.

⁵⁷ Library and Archives Canada, John Alexander Macdonald fonds, MG26-A, “Personal papers” series, volume 537, pages 253875-253878, letter from Thomas D’Arcy McGee to Ferguson, 6 February 1864, reproduction copy number C-1809.

⁵⁸ Thomas D’Arcy McGee, in the *Montreal Gazette*, Montreal, July 31, 1863.

⁵⁹ Carl Klinck, “Literary Activity in Canada East and West (1841-1880),” in *Literary History of Canada*, gen. ed. Carl Klinck, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 147.

⁶⁰ David A. Wilson, *Thomas D’Arcy McGee*, Vol. 1., (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008), 7.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 192.

in their backgrounds and political constituencies, Cartier biographer Alastair Sweeney said that the two had shared the same “good humour, the same almost pessimistic objectivity, the same organic view of society, and almost identical political principles.”⁶² Cartier left behind few letters, so what little is known about his thought is based on his public pronouncements and his personal library. The consensus seems to be that he was a man of “plenty of political action” but “very little political theory.”⁶³ Yet there is some evidence of the influence of Burke, particularly his “organic” view of society. Like Burke, Cartier believed that an established state church was critical to a stable and ordered society because it taught “the virtues of tradition and obedience.”⁶⁴ What’s more, Cartier shared Burke’s view of the French Revolution, going so far as to celebrate the Conquest which “saved us from the misery and the shame” tied to that event while providing, under the British Crown, “the fine and free institutions which we possess today.”⁶⁵ At Charlottetown in 1864, Cartier said that “we are Frenchmen as to race, but Frenchmen of the old *régime*.”⁶⁶ He meant that he rejected the French Revolution and the Enlightenment principles on which it was based.

It must be noted, however, that while such sentiments recalled Burke, they were common amongst contemporary politicians. He insisted on age and property qualifications for elected office, opposed American institutions, frequent elections and universal suffrage, and revered the

⁶² Alastair Sweeney, *George-Etienne Cartier: A Biography*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), 102.

⁶³ John Irwin Cooper, “The Political Ideas of George Etienne Cartier,” *Canadian Historical Review* 23, no. 3 (September 1942): 286-94.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 286.

⁶⁵ Brian Young, *George-Etienne Cartier: Montreal Bourgeois*, (Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1981), 73.

⁶⁶ Cartier, “Speech to the Banquet in Charlottetown,” September 8, 1864, in *The Union of the British Provinces*, by Hon. Edward Whelan, (Gardenvale, Quebec: Garden City Press, 1927), 8.

British Crown as security against popular government.⁶⁷ These were Burkean positions but they were also part of mainstream thought for Reformers and Conservatives. Indeed, Cartier began his political career in 1849 as a *rouge*. When he died, among the “comparatively few English works” was “the inevitable Macaulay.”⁶⁸ British historian and politician Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859) had been a self-declared “liberal-conservative.”⁶⁹

Cartier presents another example of the evanescence of Burke’s ideological legacy and the difficulty of distinguishing Burkean from mainstream thinking. It was possible that Cartier held ideas that could be described as Burkean without ever having read Burke. Cartier biographer Brian Young believes that “Cartier was influenced directly or indirectly by Burke's ideas. His ideas of British constitutional democracy, of class, of the benefits of monarchy, of the dangers of the French Revolution etc. all seem very Burkean - even if it is not clear that he was citing him directly.”⁷⁰ As with Macdonald, Young’s sense that Burke is both present and not present in Cartier’s political thinking raises the intellectual history problem of immanent ideology, and it leaves us devoid of definitive proof of a direct Burkean influence.

Since Burke was championed by those (i.e. John Morley) who had provided the intellectual basis of nineteenth-century liberalism, and remained popular within the British Liberal Party, it is a good possibility that certain Burkean ideas were also present in the platform of George Brown’s Reform Party. Brown won the support of the Clear Grits, whose politics were very much in the tradition of the Country Whigs. Yet Brown folded them into a Liberal party that he fashioned in his own image through his power as a journalist and publisher. He looked to the

⁶⁷ Young, *Cartier*, 74; see also Cooper, “Political Ideas of George Etienne Cartier,” 289.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁶⁹ See, for example, Owen Dudley Edwards, *Macaulay*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988).

⁷⁰ Brian Young, email message to Matthew Cain, June 21, 2016.

British Liberals as a model.⁷¹ Brown biographer J.M.S. Careless said that the “Liberalism of Cobden, Bright, and other middle-class businessmen in mid-Victorian British politics” defined Brown (though he was especially enamoured with prime minister Gladstone).⁷² Brown’s newspaper, the *Toronto Globe*, propagandised for Cobden-Bright Liberalism, spreading “mid-Victorian Liberal thought to the North American scene.”⁷³ Thus, Brown may have been another point of transmission for Burkean ideas. If Macdonald was not absorbing them from fellow conservatives, he may have encountered them in the *Globe* or from working closely with Brown as partners in Confederation.

To review, then, it is possible, if not probable, that Macdonald’s close friendships with D’Arcy McGee and Cartier and his political partnership with Brown exposed him to and infected him with Burkeanism. Moreover, as Christopher Moore has noted, this kind of thinking was characteristic of other Confederation politicians.⁷⁴ In the absence of direct evidence of a coherent

⁷¹ Brian P.N. Beaven, “Partisanship, Patronage, and the Press in Ontario, 1880-1914: Myths and Realities,” *Canadian Historical Review* 64, no. 3 (1983): 318-19. Beaven explains that both William Lyon Mackenzie, in the 1830s, and then Brown, in the 1850s, similarly used their base as journalists to mould their respective Upper Canadian Reform parties in their own image. Once again, it bears repeating that the Reform Party was based in the Country Whig tradition of civic humanism but also that, as I explained in the Introduction, Brown moved the party to the political centre by abandoning the radical left agenda that demanded, among other things, universal suffrage and republican government. That moderation of the Reform movement explains the emergence of a separate faction to the left, which called itself “Clear Grits”.

⁷² J.M.S. Careless, “The *Toronto Globe* and Agrarian Radicalism,” in *Upper Canadian Politics in the 1850’s*, ed. F.H. Underhill, et al., (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 60-61.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁷⁴ There was also Prince Edward Island MLA Edward Whelan (1824-1867), a delegate and reporter at the 1864 Quebec Conference. One of P.E.I.’s Fathers of Confederation, Whelan served as an MLA from 1845 until his death in 1867. He was also a journalist and lecturer. According to historian D.C. Harvey, among the models of orators and statesmen Whelan admired was Edmund Burke. See D.C. Harvey, Foreword to *The Union of the British Provinces*, by Hon. Edward Whelan, (Gardenvale, Quebec: Garden City Press, 1927), xviii. A review of Whelan’s career and writings shows that he “expressed and acted on a philosophy of government . . . best exemplified and argued out by Edmund Burke” (Christopher Moore, *1867: How the Fathers Made a Deal*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1997), 67). What’s more, this thinking

Burkean influence upon Macdonald, however, these observations do not provide the standard of proof necessary to support much more than an immanent ideology claim, with all its attendant shortcomings.

Applying the Burkean Test

In what follows, I first discuss in a general way what primary research revealed about Macdonald's thinking and motivations. Then I apply each of the three parts of the Burkean test to this research. Each part of the test concludes with a brief summation of how Macdonald appeared to "score" in the sense of how "Burkean" he was, and the whole concludes with a general summary. The test is then also applied to the BNA Act.

Based on the claims and inferences of Creighton et al., I had expected to find regular recitation of trademark aphorisms or, at the very least, mentions of Burke, in the Macdonald primary sources. After all, Macdonald's peers in Britain, prime ministers Gladstone and Disraeli, had openly expressed affection for Burke and acted on his wisdom.⁷⁵ Instead, I found that Macdonald rarely articulated a political philosophy that went beyond platitudes about economic development, the beneficence of British customs and institutions, and winning elections.

In part, this was because his work in the 1850s and 1860s did not call for him to theorize

was characteristic of his era and "shared by many of his fellow makers of the Canadian constitution" (*Ibid.*). That philosophy was based on things like the independence of the elected representative and responsible government (*Ibid.*, 76-79). Moore is careful to point out that the lessons Canada's constitution-makers drew from Burke were mediated by their nineteenth-century circumstances and thus not so simple.

⁷⁵ Gladstone, initially opposed to Home Rule, was converted by reading and re-reading Burke's treatment of the Irish question in British politics. Disraeli's push to enact the Second Reform Bill, in 1867, was consistent with Burke's insight that reform is most effective when granted prior to public outcry. Though a larger electoral franchise was inevitable, the 1867 Reform Bill enlarged it before the public demanded it and made Disraeli's Conservatives appear the friends of the working-man.

from first principles. Most of his time was spent administering the Office of the Attorney-General (and, later, other cabinet portfolios), and managing the personalities and electoral prospects of the Conservative Party and its candidates. As Attorney-General, for example, Macdonald was often asked to adjudicate land transfers. Responding to a request from the Commissioner of Crown Lands “as to the legality of conveying to Thomas C. Street Esquire the land covered by the waters of Lake Wawanosh in the Township of Sarnia,” Macdonald wrote “in my opinion the fee simple of such land can legally be granted by Her Majesty.”⁷⁶ That grant would not effect or prejudice “any right acquired by other parties to the use of the waters of the lake.”⁷⁷

Another example of the kind of task that preoccupied Macdonald was fielding appeals to commute prison sentences. His decisions were usually fair according to a mainstream reading of the law. In one case, he explained that “the petition referred to me on 3^d January only alleges the poverty of the convicts family as a ground for his release. This is not a sufficient ground & I cannot recommend the granting of the application.”⁷⁸ In another case, in which a William Cowan had been convicted of receiving stolen sheep, Macdonald thought there was no reasonable doubt about Cowan’s guilt. However, he took into consideration the Jury’s request for mercy and the respectable representation made on Cowan’s behalf, and suggested “that the Royal Clemency might be properly exercised by releasing the convict from imprisonment” after he completed half of his sentence.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Macdonald to the Commissioner of Crown Lands, September 7, 1855, in *Letters of Sir John A. Macdonald: 1858-1861*, ed. J.K. Johnson and C.B. Stelmach, 303.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Macdonald to the Provincial Secretary, January 16, 1860, in *Letters of Sir John A. Macdonald: 1858-1861*, ed. J.K. Johnson and C.B. Stelmach, 203.

⁷⁹ Macdonald to the Provincial Secretary, April 10, 1855, in *Letters of Sir John A. Macdonald: 1858-1861*, ed. J.K. Johnson and C.B. Stelmach, 263-64.

Throughout the 1860s Macdonald's correspondence remained focused on administrative matters. As the Minister of Militia, he was preoccupied with developing strategy to defend the border, regularly receiving police reports from border agents and policy recommendations from other civic leaders. In a letter to Macdonald dated December 30, 1864, Charles John Brydges discussed the importance of an "impending militia draft" and how the Grand Trunk Railway, of which Brydges was the managing director, could be used to move troops in case of an American invasion.⁸⁰

As a party leader, Macdonald's energy was largely spent holding the membership together and trying to broaden its appeal. Like all party leaders, for example, he had to soothe the egos of strong personalities and prevent perceived slights from escalating into destructive internal factionalism. For example, in 1861, Sidney Smith thought that his government department had been interfered with by another cabinet minister, John Rose. Macdonald responded to Smith with uncharacteristic anger, writing "don't be so damned thin skinned. Rose never meant in any way to interfere with your Department."⁸¹ Macdonald explained that there had been a simple miscommunication and "so there is no harm done and you stand at the Head of your Depart^t."⁸² Then he emphasised the need for unity, writing "we must give & take in these matters & stand to each other like bricks."⁸³

Even as Macdonald was occupied with steering British North America toward a union the internecine squabbles continued. Perhaps it was because as Macdonald's coalition grew larger, it

⁸⁰ Library and Archives Canada, John Alexander Macdonald fonds, MG26-A, "Political papers" series, volume 191, pages 79460-79462, letter from Charles John Brydges to Macdonald, 30 December 1864, reproduction copy number C-1588.

⁸¹ Macdonald to Sidney Smith, February 21, 1861, in *Letters of Sir John A. Macdonald: 1858-1861*, ed. J.K. Johnson and C.B. Stelmach, 303.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

became increasingly difficult to satisfy the ambitions of so many strong personalities. In December 1864, William Pearce Howland wrote to Macdonald suggesting that some “have arranged to have foley oppose me.”⁸⁴ Macdonald replied to Howland, writing “I can scarcely believe this. What would you wish me to do – keep me posted.”⁸⁵ This example serves to underscore just how much time Macdonald had to devote, as a leader, to managing problems created by ambition and personal jealousies and, subsequently, puts the truth to his later comments (see below) that Confederation would alleviate such tensions because the politically ambitious could be rewarded with posts commensurate with their ambitions.

Macdonald’s leadership also included making sure the party eschewed ideological rigidity; moderate positions, he knew, would alienate the least number of voters.⁸⁶ The remnants of Family Compact Tories that made up the extreme wing of the Conservative Party were the greatest obstacle. Macdonald confided to William Gillespy that “the only trouble I fear, is from the violent Tories, who are fools enough to think that a purely Conservative Gov^t can be formed.”⁸⁷ Macdonald continued, writing “now I am not so much a fool as to destroy all that I have been doing for the last 7 years. The whole Reform party would at once re-unite and the

⁸⁴ Library and Archives Canada, John Alexander Macdonald fonds, MG26-A, “Political papers” series, volume 224, pages 95985-95986, letter from William Pearce Howland to Macdonald, 12 December 1864, reproduction copy number C-1655. The “foley” referred to must be Michael Hamilton Foley, a fellow Reformer like Howland who was also in Macdonald’s cabinet. See Bruce W. Hodgins, “Foley, Michael Hamilton,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 9, (University of Toronto/Université Laval), accessed February 17, 2018, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/foley_michael_hamilton_9E.html.

⁸⁵ Library and Archives Canada, John Alexander Macdonald fonds, MG26-A, “Political papers” series, volume 224, pages 95985-95986, letter from Macdonald to William Pearce Howland, 12 December 1864, reproduction copy number C-1655.

⁸⁶ See Chapter Two. This came naturally to Macdonald, who was always turned off by ideologues, starting with his contempt for Family Compact Tories. It was more difficult trying to keep his Conservative members on message.

⁸⁷ Macdonald to William Gillespy, August 2, 1861, in *Letters of Sir John A. Macdonald: 1858-1861*, ed. J.K. Johnson and C.B. Stelmach, 355.

Conservative party be where they were when I took them up in 1854.”⁸⁸ Macdonald repeated his fear to Isaac Buchanan a few days later. Macdonald knew that without “a fair proportion of Moderate Conservatives and Conservative Liberals in the Govt,” the Liberal party would reunite, causing Conservative Liberals to “be led away by the violence & energy of the disunionists.”⁸⁹

The “game,” as he so often called it, was to attract supporters or, at the very least, avoid alienating as many interests as possible. The party had to find policies that went just far enough to earn the support of one faction without infuriating the other. This was the case, for example, in the traditional tension between Protestants and Catholics. Macdonald was fond of repeating that “half a loaf is better than no bread.” If he had a philosophy of government, then compromise was a central feature of it. He told Sidney Smith to make Catholics understand “that any attempts to increase their privileges must result in their being swept away altogether,” while Protestant Orangemen, if they wanted the right to incorporate themselves in educational and benevolent societies, had to accept that Lower Canadian Catholics had the same right.⁹⁰

The policies with the most broad-based appeal were economic development and keeping Canada in the Imperial fold. Those themes dominated his letters and his speeches in the lead-up to Confederation. Even when Macdonald had to deal with more intricate matters like religious-based disputes about separate schools, he consistently returned to those practical, inoffensive themes, especially the economy. In the letter to Smith cited just above, Macdonald dealt with the religious issues quickly before moving on to explain how developing the West would benefit Upper Canada. Indeed, most of his letter focused on that. He could already see how cities would

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Macdonald to Isaac Buchanan, August 12, 1861, in *Letters of Sir John A. Macdonald: 1858-1861*, ed. J.K. Johnson and C.B. Stelmach, 358-59.

⁹⁰ Macdonald to Sidney Smith, December 6, 1857, in *Letters of Sir John A. Macdonald: 1858-1861*, ed. J.K. Johnson and C.B. Stelmach, 468-69.

grow exponentially in comparison to rural areas, and thus how townspeople would eventually hold the balance of power in parliament. It would mean changes to tariff policy and a tax on farmers.⁹¹ Issues such as these were Macdonald's focus.

When he toasted delegates at the end of the Charlottetown Conference in 1864, he spoke about the common bonds of ancestry and "loyalty and attachment to the throne of England," and expressed his hope that the colonies would agree to preserve the British Constitution in North America.⁹² The rest of his speech he devoted to explaining how the new federation would "materially" enhance "individual and collective prosperity, politically, commercially, and socially."⁹³ There was nothing particularly deep or revealing in these remarks.

Macdonald's commitment to the British political tradition was always a key mantra. He told electors in 1861 that "the fratricidal conflict now unhappily raging in the United States shews [*sic*] us the superiority of our institutions, and of the principle on which they are based. Long may that principle, - the Monarchical principle, - prevail in this land."⁹⁴ He added "let there be no 'looking to Washington,' as was threatened by a leading member of the opposition last session."⁹⁵ It was customary for him to couple British superiority with fears of encroaching Americanism. It was why Macdonald made a point not to consider commuting prison sentences a second time. That was an American idea, as he explained to Chief Justice Robinson: "I am opposed to second commutations if they can be avoided, lest we might drift by degrees into the

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Macdonald, "Speech to the Banquet in Charlottetown," September 8, 1864, in Whelan, *The Union of the British Provinces*, (Gardenvale, Quebec: Garden City Press, 1927), 7-8.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Macdonald, "Address of the Hon. John A. Macdonald to the Electors of the City of Kingston, with Extracts from Mr. Macdonald's Speeches Delivered on different occasions in the years 1860 and 1861," Kingston, June 10, 1861, in *Letters of Sir John A. Macdonald, 1858-1861*, ed. J.K. Johnson and C.B. Stelmach, 351.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

American system.”⁹⁶

What did Macdonald list as the principle reasons for Confederation? A day after Charlottetown, he told a Halifax banquet of delegates it was ambition. Colonial union, he said, dwarfed “every question on this portion of the continent.”⁹⁷ It was a project worthy of a statesman. Macdonald explained that “for twenty long years I have been dragging myself through the dreary waste of Colonial politics. I thought there was no end, nothing worthy of ambition; but now I see something which is well worthy of all I have suffered in the cause of my little country.”⁹⁸

The next month, at Quebec City, Macdonald framed union in practical terms. For one, it would strengthen the Empire. Macdonald said, “I believe the people of England are strongly bent on keeping up her position as a mighty empire, which can only be done by helping her Colonies,” regardless of objections to the contrary by Manchester liberals (the “little Englanders” who said empire was too expensive).⁹⁹

Two, he said that while “the British North American colonies are not so profitable as Australia from a money point of view . . . if organized as a confederacy, our increased importance would soon become manifest.”¹⁰⁰ Three, as separate entities the colonies were defenceless and an embarrassment, but once united they would “become important, not only to

⁹⁶ Macdonald to Sir John Beverley Robinson, January 2, 1861, in *Letters of Sir John A. Macdonald, 1858-1861*, ed. J.K. Johnson and C.B. Stelmach, 285.

⁹⁷ Macdonald, “Speech to the Banquet in Halifax,” September 12, 1864, in Whelan, *The Union of the British Provinces*, 45.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Macdonald, Quebec City, October 11, 1864, “Hewitt Bernard’s Notes on the Quebec Conference, 11-25 October, 1864,” in *Documents on the Confederation of British North America*, ed. G.P. Browne, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969), 95.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

England, but in the eyes of foreign states.”¹⁰¹ Again, the themes were the British connection, the economy, and military defence.

When the seventy-two resolutions drafted at Quebec were introduced for parliamentary debate in Canada, Macdonald again rationalized the proposed union as a practical cure-all to longstanding dilemmas. He told the assembly that Confederation “has been looked upon by many far-seeing politicians as being eventually the means of deciding and settling very many of the vexed questions which have retarded the prosperity of the colonies as a whole, and particularly the prosperity of Canada.”¹⁰²

It would end the partisan stalemate between Conservatives and Reformers, neither of which could carry a majority. “Men of all parties and all shades of politics,” Macdonald explained, knew “that such was the danger of impending anarchy ... that unless some solution of the difficulty was arrived at, we would suffer under a succession of weak governments.”¹⁰³

Such gridlock, he said, had been detrimental to prospects for material progress. Thus, “the leading statesmen on both sides seemed to have come to the common conclusion, that some step must be taken to relieve the country from the dead-lock and impending anarchy that hung over us.”¹⁰⁴ Confederation was that step. Of course, Macdonald was playing to his audience, recognizing that ambivalent colleagues were more likely to be persuaded by practical appeals rather than by digressions to abstract principles.

Macdonald wrapped up by returning to the importance of the British connection. “So

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Macdonald, Debates, *Parliament of the United Province of Canada, 8th Parliament, 3rd Session*, February 6, 1865, in *Canada Transformed*, ed. Sarah Katherine Gibson and Arthur Milnes, 151.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 152-53.

long, too, as we form a portion of the British Empire, we shall have the example of her free institutions, of the high standard of the character of her statesmen and public men, of the purity of her legislation, and the upright administration of her laws.”¹⁰⁵ Moreover, Canada’s “public men will be actuated by principles similar to those which actuate the statesmen at home.”¹⁰⁶

What about Burke? How often did Macdonald specifically cite him in these years (1857-1867)? In the previous chapter it was seen that early in his career Macdonald had mentioned Burke a handful of times. It was no different for Macdonald’s letters and speeches from this time; if anything, references to the celebrated statesman were sparser. Macdonald cited Burke occasionally but not as often as he cited others in the British political tradition. In 1854, when he accused the Canadian government of being “steeped to the lips in infamy,” Macdonald said that “they had Walpoles in the ministry, not Pitts.”¹⁰⁷ In a letter to Brown Chamberlin, Macdonald digressed into how Pitt had held onto power with the help of Dundas.¹⁰⁸

It is worth noting that Macdonald’s esteem for the elder Pitt contrasted with Burke’s disapproval of that statesman. Burke never subscribed to a “Great Man” theory of history, so he bristled when Pitt was celebrated as such for guiding the nation to victory in the Seven Years’ War, among other things. Burke was further irritated because it was a reputation Pitt had shamelessly cultivated.¹⁰⁹ In what follows, the Burkean test is used to measure how Macdonald’s thinking stacks up against the Burkean standard.

¹⁰⁵ Macdonald, “Speech to the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada,” February 6, 1865, in John Hamilton Gray, *Confederation: Or, the Political and Parliamentary History of Canada*, Vol. I, (Toronto: Copp, Clark & Co., Printers, King St. East, 1872), 215.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Macdonald, “Steeped to the Lips in Infamy,” 1854, in Collins, *The Life and Times*, 525.

¹⁰⁸ Macdonald to Brown Chamberlin, January 21, 1856, in *Letters of Sir John A. Macdonald: 1836-1857*, ed. J.K. Johnson and C.B. Stelmach, 338.

¹⁰⁹ Lock, *Burke*, 1:283. Though Burke might have felt differently if Pitt’s politics more closely agreed with his own.

Theme I – Aversion to Abstract Speculation

The best evidence of a Burkean influence is probably the fact that Macdonald had a similar antipathy to theoretical discussions in the political arena. It was one of the few things Macdonald had consistently made explicit about his own political philosophy, usually to contrast with his first concern - material progress. His 1844 nomination speech had asserted that industry and infrastructure were priorities, and that to engage in idle speculation with other legislators would be a waste of everyone's time. Some version of this talking point was a regular feature of his speeches on the endless debate between free trade and economic protectionism.

For example, while on tour in Hamilton in 1860, Macdonald told the crowd "it is, as I have often said before, useless to discuss the abstract principles of free trade and protection, but it is a matter for congratulation that the tariff has been so adjusted as incidentally to encourage manufacturing industry here. I hope all will see the advantages of a home market."¹¹⁰ Later that year he told Londoners "it is not necessary for the Government to discuss the question of protection or free trade. In order that the province might keep its faith with the public creditor . . . there has been an adjustment of the customs duties" to raise revenue and encourage domestic manufacturing.¹¹¹

The context is that there was consistent pressure from those who felt that economic development, including U.S. levels of industrialization, would be achieved more quickly through the free flow of goods, and from those who felt it would only be possible through full protectionism (in the form of prohibitively high tariffs). Yet Macdonald had seen struggle and prosperity under each system. He recognized that what mattered was how Canada adapted to the

¹¹⁰ Macdonald, quoted in Pope, *Memoirs*, 1:208.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 208-09.

prevailing economic conditions (which would always be dictated by the larger, more powerful nations), and not whether, in the abstract, one policy had more to recommend it than another. Too many other politicians had demonstrated how easy it was to be pulled into a debate to prove oneself right even when they had started out with real, concrete solutions.

Macdonald's roll-out of the "National Policy" years later showed that he had not changed his thinking. He still thought the principle of free trade, "viewed as an abstract proposition, was indisputably sound," but maintained that "its successful application in the concrete depended upon conditions which were not always present" in Canada.¹¹² Selling the policy to the House of Commons in 1878 he said it was "the duty of a statesman to deal with facts, not speculate in theories, and to adopt such a policy as would best meet the varying needs of the country."¹¹³ Macdonald, "for his part, was not prepared to make a fetish of free trade" and let the nation languish "merely that her rulers might continue faithful to the maxims of Cobden."¹¹⁴

Macdonald's inclination to trust the lessons of history may also have originated with a Burkean influence. His adamant that Confederation should provide for a powerful "General Government" and confer "on the Provincial bodies only such powers as may be required for local purposes" had come from observing the example of the United States.¹¹⁵ Their constitution had worked against a spirit of national unity because it had reserved to the states too many sovereign powers. Thus, the states "had no sympathies in common," and continued to act, as they

¹¹² Pope, *Memoirs*, 2:200.

¹¹³ Macdonald, *Journals*, to the House of Commons, March 12, 1878, quoted in Pope, *Memoirs*, 2:200-201.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Macdonald, Quebec City, October 11, 1864, "Hewitt Bernard's *Notes on the Quebec Conference*, 11-25 October 1864," in *Documents on the Confederation of British North America*, ed. G.P. Browne, 94.

always had, as “separate sovereignties.”¹¹⁶

In sum, Macdonald’s objectives were Confederation, economic development, and maintaining British customs and institutions. He had no time for protracted and contentious debates, except to manipulate them at a distance (with missives to party operatives). He told Sidney Smith that “politics is a game requiring great coolness and an utter abnegation of prejudice and personal feeling.”¹¹⁷ Winning required setting aside one’s own prejudices while playing to the prejudice of others. Macdonald did not want, he said, to “lose the Catholics,” but “working” them meant that he would eventually need to “soothe the Orangemen.”¹¹⁸ He may have “formulated policies and adhered to principles,” yet he always “allowed ample room for manoeuvre and within this space operated superbly as a political strategist, tactician, technician, manager, and craftsman.”¹¹⁹

Yet Burke arguably would not have approved of the ease with which Macdonald could set aside his own sense of right and wrong in order to secure political advantage. Confident in his convictions, Burke typically did not rest until he had either brought others around to his position or failed in the attempt. He sincerely believed that leaders had a moral duty to act in what they believed was the best interest of the people; if they knew what it was, they were derelict if they did not immediately act.

In contrast, Macdonald was more comfortable playing political calculus. To him, the “right thing” could be postponed if it endangered the grip on power. For instance, he had proposed progressive reforms to bankruptcy law that would put an end to debtors’ prison, yet he

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 94-95.

¹¹⁷ Macdonald to Sidney Smith, October 13, 1860, in *Letters of Sir John A. Macdonald: 1858-1861*, ed. J.K. Johnson and C.B. Stelmach, 268-69.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Swainson, “Kingstonians in the Second Parliament,” 263.

delayed in order to secure a political advantage, telling James Gowan: “I am not going on with the Bankrupt Bill this Session. I have put the Grits into the false position of voting against the principle of the Bill & . . . I will throw the whole responsibility on the Grits, so that every insolvent will know who their friends are at the next election.”¹²⁰ After all, what use was pursuing the moral policy if it failed and handed power back to one’s opponents? It was a lesson Burke had never learned.

This brings us to the end of the first part of the Burkean test, and the evidence is inconclusive. On balance, it appears to tilt more in the direction of a Burkean influence than away from it, yet not in any definitive way.

On one hand, Macdonald clearly expressed distaste for abstract theorizing and speculation, consistent with Burke. Further, repeated remarks about trade and tariffs, particularly in the context of the National Policy, suggest that, like Burke, Macdonald understood the importance of circumstance in the application of theory.

Also suggestive of an influence is a similar recognition that the successful leader, rather than struggle against human nature, found ways to channel it that served the greater good. For Burke, selfishness and greed could be used to grow general prosperity, while Macdonald was able to play personal and sectional jealousies off against each other and keep the focus on common goals. His statement to Smith about “working” the Catholics and Orangemen was an example.

Finally, we may also consider here what Macdonald had said, early in his career, about reforming the electoral franchise and the Clergy Reserves. As I explained above in Chapter

¹²⁰ Macdonald to James Robert Gowan, May 3, 1861, in *Letters of Sir John A. Macdonald: 1858-1861*, ed. J.K. Johnson and C.B. Stelmach, 324.

Three, Macdonald had argued, in the vein of Burke, that any changes should be made carefully and only then after gauging the public mood about whether such changes were felt to be necessary.

Yet it ran opposite to the statesman's advice when Macdonald agreed to a federal union of British North American colonies. The United Kingdom was a legislative union, and that model had proven successful by standing the test of time. Burke would likely have said that a federation was experimental and therefore too risky, and that Macdonald was ignoring the lessons of history.

Then again, Macdonald had repeatedly said that he preferred a legislative union but dropped it because it was a deal-breaker for French Canadians. He had not wanted to deviate from the historically-proven British model, and that pointed to Burke, as did Macdonald's willingness to compromise.

What's more, history furnished more than one lesson about constitution-making. Experience may have shown the success of legislative union, but it also provided the American precedent, including its pitfalls, for founding a federated nation upon a Westminster system of government.¹²¹ Insistence upon a stronger national government was a response to the spirit of disunity in the United States.

Theme II – Form and Composition of Government

Macdonald was ambivalent about democracy, just as Burke had been. On the most important democratic question of his day – representation by population – Macdonald cared less

¹²¹ Germany and Italy federated in the early 1860s, but under very different historical circumstances. Their examples were not readily applicable.

for the merits of the principle than about the way it was driving a wedge between the two halves of the Province of Canada. By the mid-1850s the population of English-speaking Canada West had grown substantially and outnumbered French-speaking Canada East. Each section had been allotted an equal number of elected representatives at the time of union in 1841, but as Canada West grew more populous it resented having less per capita representation than Canada East. If representation in the assembly were based on population, then English-speakers could easily dominate the government agenda. French Canadians were steadfastly opposed, fearing that their language, religion, and customs would be legislated out of existence as their numbers dwindled.

Macdonald repeatedly emphasised how to manage the debate and how the question would ultimately be settled. To MLA George Benjamin, he wrote that it was permissible to “Go for Rep by pop. As strongly if you like,” but cautioned him not to say “that it must be granted if a majority of U C members say so. Such a proposition goes as far as M^cDougall or any Rad.”¹²² Pushing too hard would alienate the French, and Macdonald warned “as you are situated *do not put yourself in opposition to the French*. You are popular with them & not overpopular with the U.C members of the last House. The French are your sheet anchor.”¹²³ To Macdonald, “no government could be formed from either side of the House to carry out that principle,” and thus representation by population would only be possible once the issue was put “to the country upon its own merits.”¹²⁴

By 1864, Macdonald had accepted that members of the proposed federal parliament

¹²² Macdonald to George Benjamin, June 4, 1861, in *Letters of Sir John A. Macdonald: 1858-1861*, ed. J.K. Johnson and C.B. Stelmach, 342.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ Macdonald, Kingston, June 10, 1861, “Address of the Hon. John A. Macdonald to the Electors of the City of Kingston, with Extracts from Mr. Macdonald’s Speeches Delivered on different occasions in the years 1860 and 1861,” in *Letters of Sir John A. Macdonald: 1858-1861*, ed. J.K. Johnson and C.B. Stelmach, 351.

would be elected, and that population would be used to determine the number of members granted each province. Yet he remained concerned to check the further spread of democracy. He was clear that “by representation by population, universal suffrage is not in any way sanctioned.”¹²⁵ The vote was still limited to men with certain property qualifications, and he did not think the masses were ready to handle democratic participation responsibly.

Macdonald also had to deal with the democratic voices who wanted an elected Senate. Previously, Legislative Councillors (the pre-Confederation equivalent of Senators) had been appointed by the Crown’s representative. They spoke for a wealthy and powerful minority of which they were members and had, in theory, thwarted the worst impulses of the majority (as represented by the elected Legislative Assembly).

Macdonald feared removing that protection for the minority. To pacify the hardliners and keep negotiations moving, he said he would keep his mind “open on that point,” but in truth he had always been “in favour of appointment by the Crown.”¹²⁶ He stopped short of saying that the elective principle had been a failure in Canada, but he thought it would be best, in the design of a federal constitution, to “return to the original principle and in the words of Governor Simcoe endeavour to make ours ‘an image and transcript of the British Constitution.’”¹²⁷ An appointed Upper House, of course, would be consistent with the House of Lords which was also a powerful chamber unaccountable to the masses.

His speech in 1861 to the Legislative Assembly again revealed Macdonald’s ambivalence

¹²⁵ Macdonald, “Speech to the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada,” February 6, 1865, in Gray, *Confederation*, 208.

¹²⁶ Macdonald, Quebec City, October 11, 1864, “Hewitt Bernard’s Notes on the Quebec Conference, 11-25 October, 1864,” in *Documents on the Confederation of British North America*, ed. G.P. Browne, 97.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

about democracy. He said that “experience has shown that [universal suffrage] leaves a nation weak and leads it toward anarchy and despotism, unless there was a middle power, unless property is protected and was made one of two principles on which representation was based.”¹²⁸

Macdonald’s statement touches on a number of Burkean test points. Once again, Macdonald demonstrated that his inclination was to trust historical example; in theory, universal suffrage may have appeared promising, but he regarded it as largely unproven. What’s more, the prescription for a strong “middle power” to prevent a slide toward mob rule and, eventually, a return to autocracy, recalled not only the constitutional equipoise Burke had championed, but his prognosis for the French Revolution.¹²⁹ Finally, it was a Burkean idea that the protection of private property was critical to liberty in a stable social order.

On the face of it then, Macdonald appeared to have regarded democracy much as Burke had, with begrudging acceptance as the price of satisfying those elements in society. Yet Macdonald seemed to have felt less strongly about it since, as Lower said, Macdonald was generally not steadfast about his own ideas and would compromise. He preferred an appointment process for Senators, for example, but his comments had made clear that he would yield if necessary.

It also has to be said that the democratic element of the British Constitution had been considerably strengthened in the nineteenth century, complicating the comparison. Macdonald was comfortable with a much broader electorate than that to which an eighteenth-century Whig

¹²⁸ Macdonald, April 19, 1861, Province of Canada, *Debates*, quoted in Preece, “The Political Wisdom of Sir John A. Macdonald,” 472.

¹²⁹ As I explained in Chapter Two, in the *Reflections* Burke predicted that once the institutional infrastructure of the *Ancien Régime* had been completely destroyed, French society would fall into a state of anarchy, and that it would only end with the installation of a strongman. That, of course, is exactly what happened, leading to Napoléon Bonaparte.

was accustomed.¹³⁰ Macdonald had even chided Chamberlin for refusing to admit “the principle that the majority must govern.”¹³¹ Burke would have disagreed.

What about statesmen? Who was best qualified, in Macdonald’s view, to lead, and how did it compare with Burke’s prescriptions? Canada did not have a landed aristocracy, so the (largely idealized) British model of virtuous noblemen shielded from the temptations of office and acting in the best interest of all was out of the question. The wealthy minority that Macdonald dealt with was self-interested and short-sighted, not a disinterested hereditary class of rulers.

As for elected representatives, Macdonald took a view of their role and responsibility that suggested a similarity with Burke, particularly if it is true that he had said “the government are merely trustees for the public.”¹³² Burke had frequently spoken of representation in terms of trusteeship. There is some question, however, about whether Macdonald said it, since the quote is one of many listed without context in the Biggar biography of Macdonald. Biggar listed many such quotes and said only that the phrases had appeared in various Macdonald speeches in 1861.

Even if Macdonald said it, however, more context is needed to know what, precisely, he meant by “trustee.” If he meant that politicians should serve in the best interests of the public while setting their own welfare aside, then it was consistent with Burke. It is a strong possibility, too, since Macdonald had demonstrated by his own example that personal sacrifice went hand in

¹³⁰ In Burke’s time, the Irish and Catholics were barred from voting, for example, and only the most affluent property owners had the vote. In Canada by the 1850s, the property qualifications for voting had been lowered so that more working-class voters took part.

¹³¹ Macdonald to Brown Chamberlin, January 21, 1856, in *Letters of Sir John A. Macdonald: 1836-1857*, ed. J.K. Johnson and C.B. Stelmach, 338. Macdonald was responding to the complaints of English-speakers in Lower Canada upset with their minority status in that section of the province. He suspected they wanted “*ascendancy*,” not equality.

¹³² Macdonald, undated, 1861, in Biggar, *Anecdotal Life of Macdonald*, 182. Starting on page 180, Biggar lists a number of quotations taken from undated Macdonald speeches in 1861.

hand with public service.

He had also complained about the paucity of other well-intentioned politicians, and expressed disgust with those who only served their own interests. In 1854, for example, he attacked the ministry of the day, arguing that “it was steeped to the very lips in infamy; they were tainted with corruption, collectively and individually, both in their private and public characters. All honour had gone from them, all loyalty even to one another.”¹³³ The only bond that held them together was “the bond of common plunder.”¹³⁴

Letters to Brown Chamberlin in October 1860 revealed the importance Macdonald placed on good character as qualification for political service. Macdonald wrote “I have no personal views, & desire only to see a number of respectable men entering into public life.”¹³⁵ A few days earlier he had written “it is quite certain the true game of a real lover of his country is to try to improve the tone & morale of the Conservative Party, and not to upset it. The Grits have neither loyalty, nor policy nor honesty to recommend them.”¹³⁶ So, even though half of Burke’s prescription was inapplicable, Macdonald’s sentiments recalled the former’s emphasis upon virtue and disinterestedness as the qualifications of the statesman.

Moving to the construction of a constitution, the British example of a legislative union could not be copied whole-cloth.¹³⁷ The blueprint for a federation, in fact, was American, yet despite this, Macdonald sought a design for Canada that would preserve the spirit, if not the

¹³³ Macdonald, “Steeped to the Lips in Infamy,” 1854, in Collins, *The Life and Times*, 525.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ Macdonald to Brown Chamberlin, October 17, 1860, in *Letters of Sir John A. Macdonald: 1858-1861*, ed. J.K. Johnson and C.B. Stelmach, 269.

¹³⁶ Macdonald to Brown Chamberlin, October 13, 1860, in *Letters of Sir John A. Macdonald: 1858-1861*, ed. J.K. Johnson and C.B. Stelmach, 268.

¹³⁷ As I explained above, Macdonald had had to settle for a federal union with a national legislature and provincial (“local”) legislatures.

precise legal form, of the British Constitution.

This could be done by taking an approach, wherever possible, that differed from what Americans had done. Assigning “sovereign powers” to the “Local Legislatures,” Macdonald said, “would be adopting the worst features of the United States.”¹³⁸ Instead, he argued, “we should concentrate the power in the Federal Government, and not adopt the decentralization of the United States.”¹³⁹ Macdonald rationalized that by doing so, Canada would effectively be taking a British approach because it was reproducing, writ small, its own relationship to the Imperial centre: the “General Government assumes towards the local governments precisely the same position as the Imperial Governments holds with respect to each of the colonies now.”¹⁴⁰

Macdonald repeatedly expressed his belief that the “British system” was best because it had a track record of inhibiting tyranny. He championed the seventy-two Quebec Resolutions in the Legislative Assembly by extolling the protections and “the advantages we derive from our connection with England,” with perhaps the most important being “the privileges of constitutional liberty according to the British system.”¹⁴¹

When Macdonald continued, in the same speech, it was clear that he had a greater fear of a tyrannical mob than an autocrat, explaining that “we will have the rights of the minority respected.”¹⁴² He went on, saying “in all countries the rights of the majority take care of themselves, but it is only in countries like England, enjoying constitutional liberty, and safe from

¹³⁸ Macdonald, Quebec City, October 24, 1864, “Hewitt Bernard’s Notes on the Quebec Conference, 11-25 October, 1864,” in *Documents on the Confederation of British North America*, ed. G.P. Browne, 124.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Macdonald, “Speech to the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada,” February 6, 1865, in Gray, *Confederation*, 213.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

the tyranny of a single despot or of an unbridled democracy, that the rights of minorities are regarded.”¹⁴³

Yet as his remarks made clear, Macdonald did have concerns about vesting too much power in one individual. He had voiced such concerns at the Quebec Conference as well, singling out the U.S. Presidency. Specifically, he argued that “a great evil in the United States is that the President is a despot for four years.”¹⁴⁴ The “President is the leader of a party, and obliged to consider himself as bound to protect the rights of a majority.”¹⁴⁵ However, he continued, “under the British Constitution, with the people having always the power in their own hands and with the responsibility of a Ministry to Parliament, we are free from such despotism.”¹⁴⁶

This concludes the second part of the Burkean test. Against the second criteria for “Burkeaniness”, Macdonald’s ambivalent acceptance of the democratic fact and his desire for more “respectable” men in politics were consistent with Burke. It was also in keeping with Burke to glorify the British Constitution as guaranteeing the wisest and fairest form of government. Repeating Governor Simcoe’s call to reproduce the British Constitution placed Macdonald squarely in the tradition of Loyalists and the coterie of Tory officials who brought Burke with them to Upper Canada.

However, the similarities all come with important qualifications. For one, Macdonald did not need the wisdom of sages to tell him that politicians of stronger moral character were needed

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Macdonald, Quebec City, October 11, 1864, “Hewitt Bernard’s Notes on the Quebec Conference, 11-25 October, 1864,” in *Documents on the Confederation of British North America*, ed. G.P. Browne, 97.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

in Canada. Two, eighteenth-century prescriptions about the composition of government and its responsibilities to the people were not especially valid in Macdonald's context because of a larger electorate, and the absence of a disinterested, unaccountable nobility.

Most important, however, everything Macdonald said on these matters was conventional political thought. At the Halifax banquet, for example, other statesmen had similar talking points about constitutional liberty in the British tradition. Nova Scotia Lt.-Gov. Sir Richard McDonnell said "in a country like this," the institutions which had "grown up under the auspices of the British throne and constitution" were "the freest ever known in history."¹⁴⁷ The Hon. T.H. Haviland "alluded to the glorious constitution of old England as being the basis of our liberties," and said that "the revolution of democracy" must be "stemmed by the monarchical institutions of our common country."¹⁴⁸ Alexander Galt said the provinces had come together "with a liberal and patriotic desire to improve our lot, and to perpetuate and preserve British institutions in a truly British spirit."¹⁴⁹

In sum, Macdonald may have developed his thoughts after encountering Burke's wisdom first-hand (in the sense of reading his published writings or biographies and other secondary sources), or, and what is probably more likely, he was a politician with mainstream positions in a tradition that Burke had a large hand in shaping. Again, the immanent ideology dilemma presents itself.

¹⁴⁷ Sir Richard Graves McDonnell, "Speech to the Banquet at Halifax," September 12, 1864, in Whelan, *The Union of the British Provinces*, 19.

¹⁴⁸ Hon. T.H. Haviland, M.P.P., "Speech to the Banquet at Halifax," September 12, 1864, in Whelan, *The Union of the British Provinces*, 15.

¹⁴⁹ A.T. Galt, "Speech to the Quebec Conference," October 15, 1864, in Whelan, *The Union of the British Provinces*, 86.

Theme III – Rights, Freedoms, and the Form of Society

The biography of Macdonald in Chapter Three explained that he was tolerant of diversity, even sympathizing with minorities. Others have frequently made the same point, and singled out the passage in Macdonald's January, 1856 letter to Brown Chamberlin where he argued that the Lower Canadian "Britisher" must "make friends with the French; without sacrificing the status of his race or lineage, he must respect their nationality."¹⁵⁰ The French deserved respect and equal treatment. Macdonald said "treat them as a nation and they will act as a free people generally do – generously. Call them a faction, and they become factious."¹⁵¹

He may have sympathized, but he was probably motivated as much by pragmatism as by a moral feeling because elsewhere in the letter he pointed out that "no man in his senses can suppose that this country can for a century to come be governed by a totally unfrenchified Gov^t."¹⁵² Macdonald did not seem particularly invested in the welfare of French Canadians; their place in Canada was just one part of a political equation. He suggested that their influence could be diminished through the remedies of "immigration & copulation and these will work wonders."¹⁵³ This had shades of Burke; tolerate diversity where it existed but avoid if it possible and do not encourage it.

Still, Macdonald remained committed to protecting minority rights, a point he emphasised on the first day of the Quebec Conference. Though he wanted a "powerful central government" to avoid the American problem of separate sovereignties with "no sympathies in

¹⁵⁰ Macdonald to Brown Chamberlin, January 21, 1856, in *Letters of Sir John A. Macdonald: 1836-1857*, ed. J.K. Johnson and C.B. Stelmach, 339.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 338-39.

common,” caution was needed to avoid overstep.¹⁵⁴ As he said, “the people of every section must feel that they are protected, and by no overstraining of central authority should such guarantees be overridden.”¹⁵⁵ The rights of local legislatures to protect their distinctive customs and cultures had to be respected.

On the one hand, Macdonald had to say that to secure support for Confederation from the founding colonies (for obvious reasons, French Canadians were especially worried about retaining their distinctiveness). So, he may not have really meant what he said about protecting minorities, and if that is the case, then it was one less thing he had in common with the Burkean philosophy. On the other hand, Macdonald had made a pragmatic concession to French Canadians to get Confederation through, and pragmatism *was* considered a central tenet of Burke’s thought.

Macdonald probably meant what he said about minority rights, given his previously-expressed sympathy for minorities and his choice, in 1873, not to use the federal power of disallowance to void New Brunswick legislation that had just eliminated Roman Catholic separate schools. Outraged French-Catholics in his party and throughout the country demanded Macdonald use disallowance to restore the schools over the wishes of the Protestant majority in the province. Yet he refused, reasoning that *within* Canada, the provinces themselves were minorities, and that they had every right “to act in consonance with the wishes of their people.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Macdonald, Quebec City, October 11, 1864, “Hewitt Bernard’s Notes on the Quebec Conference, 11-25 October 1864” in *Documents on the Confederation of British North America*, ed. G.P. Browne, 94-95.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁵⁶ Macdonald, Debates, *House of Commons, 2nd Parliament, 1st Session*, May 14, 1873, in *Canada Transformed*, ed. Sarah Katherine Gibson and Arthur Milnes, 358-68. New Brunswick had secularized its school system, which angered the Catholic minority in the province. Many of

It was also true that Macdonald was surrendering the Catholics of New Brunswick to the larger linguistic and religious group. Yet to take such a position meant that he was also upholding Quebec's right to safeguard French-Canadian culture from the rest of a country that was predominantly English-speaking and Protestant. All told, it was a wash.

On the question of "liberty," Macdonald had appeared to share with Burke the idea that it did not inhere in the democratic excesses of the United States. Too strong a democratic element and society all too easily could devolve into mob rule. As we have seen, his fears of the American system and universal suffrage emerged in many of his statements. These were part of a larger conventional notion that restrictions had to be placed on some elements of society in order to guarantee freedom for all.

A key difference, however, is that Burke had said more, outlining the relationship between restraint and liberty *within* the individual. In his view, true freedom was possible only through some measure of self-restraint; pleasures such as drink, sex, and gambling could be indulged too far, and one could find himself a prisoner to his own desires. Society had a responsibility to make it difficult to partake of such vices. Macdonald did not say anything about this so far as I could find.¹⁵⁷

The foundation of all liberty, Burke said, inhered in the principle that private property was sacred. All members of society had the right to protection of their possessions by the law. If one's home, land, or business could be taken, without cause, either by government or thieves,

Macdonald's colleagues wanted it disallowed. As a consistent supporter of minority rights, Macdonald had, as he said in the speech, "for many years voted in favour of separate schools," for Catholics in Ontario and Protestants in Quebec. However, as a minority in a federation, each province had the right to pass legislation representing the wishes of the people.

¹⁵⁷ Macdonald's notorious drinking problem seemingly put him at odds with this Burkean maxim, but as already noted, personality traits and personal habits do not provide any basis for evaluating ideological congruity.

then no one was safe from such tyranny.

Again, Macdonald appeared to have shared a similar view. His statements about the dangers of majority rule, for example, spoke to a fear that jealous mobs would, if given the chance, quickly confiscate the wealth and property of the rich. That is why he had laid out the need for a Senate composed of reasonably wealthy, propertied men, to balance the jealousies represented by the House of Commons where attempts would no doubt be made to confiscate the wealth of the nation with high taxes.

It is also possible to suggest a correlation between Burke's progressive thinking on crime and punishment and Macdonald's decisions as Attorney-General. Recall that the former had advocated lifting the more draconian measures still on the books; Burke's views were more befitting the mid-nineteenth century criminal justice policies than those of his own time. Exercising control over a mid-century justice system, in Canada, that had evolved from the same tradition, Macdonald appeared to be content with its balance between punishment and rehabilitation.

In other areas of policy there were clear differences between Burke and Macdonald, such as on the size and scope of government. For example, Burke had outlined a limited state with tightly circumscribed responsibilities. It did not interfere with the free market economy or otherwise take an interventionist role in society.¹⁵⁸ The state could prevent evil, but it was not capable of much positive good.

Perhaps Macdonald may have felt the same way if his circumstances had not been very different. Since at least the 1820s, it had been necessary for British North American governments

¹⁵⁸ Again, see Edmund Burke, *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, (London: 1800). There Burke outlines a general economic view that intervention typically only made things worse.

to take a leading role in the staples-based economy that depended on expensive transportation infrastructure. Since there was not sufficient private capital to finance such projects, the state had often been forced to finance them through borrowing.

There was no question, then, of a limited state for Macdonald; state intervention was the only way forward. An example will serve to illustrate. In 1857, Macdonald sent a long memorandum to Britain's Secretary of State for the Colonies, explaining the urgent need to construct the Intercolonial Railway between Halifax and Quebec City and asking the Imperial government to back the necessary loans.¹⁵⁹ This was standard operating procedure.

This marks the end of the third and final part of the Burkean test as it applies to Macdonald. To summarise, he was tolerant of diversity (though did not encourage it), and he defended the rights of minorities, all consistent with Burke. The prime minister also clearly prioritized the protection of property and the form of constitutional liberty which flowed from the British system that had been championed by Burke.

However, in this Macdonald was like most politicians of his time; there is not enough here to show a conscious or inordinate Burkean influence. Moreover, this part of the test shows a clear difference between their positions on the role of government with respect to the economy. Thus, once again the results are, ultimately, inconclusive.

The British North America Act

Much has already been written about the content of the BNA Act. Often it has been contrasted with the Declaration of Independence to highlight a supposedly fundamental

¹⁵⁹ Macdonald to Henry Labouchere, HM Secretary of State for the Colonies, August 14, 1857, in *Letters of Sir John A. Macdonald: 1836-1857*, ed. J.K. Johnson and C.B. Stelmach, 444-52.

difference between the animating spirits of Canada and the United States. The Canadian constitution typically suffers from the comparison because it appears uninspired, written in legalise and corporate speak. The Americans, meanwhile, had used the language of the European Enlightenment to infuse their independence project with an idealistic vision.

Rather than delve into such historiography, however, my concern here is to analyse the wording of the Act, as well as the resolutions of the conferences which preceded it, using the Burkean test, as I just did for Macdonald. The analysis reveals that there is nothing specific (i.e. no trademark phrasing) in the Act that definitively points to Burke.

Historian Christopher Moore has argued that the BNA Act's preamble contained a Burkean philosophy of government, pointing to the phrase "a Constitution similar in Principle to that of the United Kingdom."¹⁶⁰ But Moore's reading is possible only if that philosophy is reduced to a pragmatic approach to the mundane functions of government that also avoids the lofty language of first principles and natural rights. Whereas the U.S. Constitution's preamble echoed the Declaration of Independence by emphasising the people and individual liberty, the BNA Act began by plainly stating the intention of the Province of Canada to unite with the colonies of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick under the Crown of the United Kingdom. It offered that the union would "conduce to the Welfare of the Provinces and promote the Interests of the British Empire," but there was in it no transcendent vision of government based in superior principles.¹⁶¹

The BNA Act had the form and language of a corporate contract. It names the parties – four provinces and the federal government (and, left unsaid, their inhabitants) – that will be

¹⁶⁰ *British North America Act*, 1867. See Moore, *1867*, 81.

¹⁶¹ *BNA Act*, 1867.

bound by the agreement. Then it spells out the institutional forms that will provide for the government of the new state. The federal government, for example, will have an elected lower chamber styled after the British House of Commons, as well as an unelected upper chamber styled after the House of Lords but to be referred to as the “Senate.”

Executive power will remain nominally vested in the monarch’s representative, the Governor-General, but in practice will be exercised by a cabinet of ministers chosen from the majority party in the House of Commons. The forms of the provincial governments are then explained. Quebec will retain its Legislative Council (an unelected upper chamber), while Ontario will not, and so forth.

The agreement also provides for how many members of parliament and Senators there are to be, and how they will be apportioned across Canada. The number of parliamentary seats for each province will be based on population, while twenty-four Senators each will be apportioned to three geographical regions (Ontario, Quebec, and the two Maritime Provinces). It then lists the criteria that will determine eligibility to vote, sit in the House of Commons, or serve in the Senate. It details how often parliament must meet and when elections must be called. In addition, it lists the electoral districts in each province as well as the social, economic, and geographic metrics used to determine district boundaries.

Section VI of the BNA Act delimits jurisdictional responsibilities between the federal government and the provinces, taking several pages to specify, for example, who is to legislate on taxes, customs duties, and education, and who is to be responsible for military defence and the postal service.

Many analyses of the Act have said that it is here, in Section VI, clause 91, that the philosophical spirit of Canadian political culture is to be found. Specifically, they point to the

statement “It shall be lawful for the Queen, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate and House of Commons, to make Laws for the Peace, Order, and good Government of Canada” on all matters not assigned to the provinces.¹⁶²

The Canadian philosophy is supposedly clear when that last statement is contrasted with the American mantra of “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”¹⁶³ According to the Burkanadians, Canadians prioritized public order above individual liberty. Their emphasis was on those who *governed*, and secured that order, not on “the people” who, in the tradition of John Locke and then the Enlightenment, could at any time withdraw their consent to be governed.¹⁶⁴

Clause 91 could have been inspired by Burkean political wisdom. As I have already explained, he believed that limiting individual freedoms (what some called the “Rights of Man”) in fact increased liberty, which could be secured only when property was protected and public order guaranteed. Again, however, that was a mainstream tenet in British political thought. Burke just happened to have been among its most vocal proponents.¹⁶⁵

The final version of the BNA Act very closely resembled the resolutions that had been drafted at Quebec in October 1864 and further refined at the London Conference in December 1866.¹⁶⁶ Those resolutions had been the product of debates over practical matters like how much debt the new federal government would cover for each of the former colonies. Delegates, especially at Quebec, discussed issues such as export duties on coal and timber and whether the

¹⁶² *BNA Act*, 1867.

¹⁶³ *Declaration of Independence*, 1776.

¹⁶⁴ W.L. Morton, *The Canadian Identity*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961).

¹⁶⁵ It was also important that reserve powers were assigned to the federal government and not to the provinces, reversing the American formula. It was also mainstream British thinking to avoid anything resembling American ideas and practices.

¹⁶⁶ See *The Quebec Resolutions*, October, 1864, and *The London Resolutions*, December, 1866, in *Documents on the Confederation of British North America*, ed. G.P. Browne, 153-65, and 217-28, respectively.

Queen's representative was to be titled a Viceroy or Governor-General.¹⁶⁷

In Canada it was idiomatic that “all politics is railways.” The BNA Act underscored the truth of that idiom. Section X, clause 145 declared that the agreement to incorporate was contingent upon the eventual completion of a railway (the Intercolonial) connecting the St. Lawrence River with Halifax. The Intercolonial was to be an immediate priority for the new Government of Canada after the Act went into effect July 1, 1867.

The language of the clause makes plain that without the railway, Confederation almost certainly would not have happened. It declares that “the Provinces of Canada, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick have joined in a Declaration that the Construction of the Intercolonial Railway is *essential* to the Consolidation of the Union of British North America,” and in particular “the Assent thereto of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick.”¹⁶⁸ The railway was necessary to keep the new provinces physically connected during the winter months when the St. Lawrence froze over, without having to rely on U.S. railroads for transport. Of course, the railway would also mean more efficient transportation of imports and exports, including settlers, and therefore economic development.

In brief, Canada's institutional blueprint did not go beyond the barest of details. It specified only what was necessary to the function of the state, and nothing of the reasons to justify its design. This characteristic makes the application of the Burkean test an odd process. Political ideas are notably absent from the act. The most that can be said here is that the BNA Act appears to have been the product of a conventional wisdom shared by those in the British tradition of the time. Like Macdonald, it was “Burkean” only insofar as Burke had reflected and

¹⁶⁷ See “Hewitt Bernard's Notes on the Quebec Conference,” in *Documents on the Confederation of British North America*, ed. G.P. Browne, 113-19.

¹⁶⁸ *BNA Act*, 1867 (my emphasis).

helped to shape the tradition.

Results of the Test – A Summary

I have argued that a combination of Macdonald's papers, Confederation negotiations, and the BNA Act together form a sufficient basis for assessing the key ideological features of the political culture that gave rise to the modern Canadian state. Despite the continued popularity of the notion that there is something "Burkean" about Canada, rooted in its Tory past, in fact there is only the flimsiest basis in the historical record to support the claim.

The principle focus of my study has been Macdonald. Canada's first prime minister left behind a record of his day-to-day administrative duties and political calculus. There was no room or time, he had repeatedly said, for expounding upon abstract notions. His only firm policies – the British connection and economic development – were couched in generic platitudes and a firm rejection of philosophizing. Neither the transcripts of negotiations nor the BNA Act differed markedly in substance.

The application of the test was inconclusive in part because primary documents revealed few explicit ideological statements. Many who have studied the textual record left by Macdonald and his contemporaries have noted that among Confederation politicians, "some beliefs about parliamentary government were so fundamental that they did not even enter into the discussions."¹⁶⁹ The small group of educated and propertied men who negotiated political union were accustomed to the British political tradition, with all the assumptions about the supremacy of its institutions that that entailed. That was especially true of conservatives like Macdonald. As

¹⁶⁹ Sarah Katherine Gibson and Arthur Milnes, Introduction to Macdonald's Speech, *Parliament of the United Province of Canada, 8th Parliament, 3rd Session*, February 6, 1865, Quebec City in *Canada Transformed*, ed. Sarah Katherine Gibson and Arthur Milnes, 148.

Wise suggested, “reconstructing the conservative mind” poses a particularly daunting challenge because “it is rarely explicit about [its] most cherished beliefs; he assumes things to be immutably true, unnecessary to explain to friends and pointless to attempt to explain to enemies.”¹⁷⁰ So there was no need for Macdonald or his colleagues to delve into discussions from first principles as American Founding Fathers Madison, Hamilton, and Jefferson had done.

This is the methodological dilemma inherent to the intellectual history approach that in the Introduction was titled “immanent ideology.” Over time, the form of government stamps itself “on the manners, morals, and opinions of a people” until “they no longer question it.”¹⁷¹ The ideologies immanent in the actions of the politicians gathered to negotiate Confederation were expressed in the “actual operating institutions” of the societies in which they had been raised.¹⁷²

That immanent ideology, in Macdonald’s case, included an unquestioning faith in British institutions and the notable absence of speculative or theoretical digressions. It was a Court Whig ideology in keeping with the tradition of Loyalists and transplanted Tories from Britain. It accepted the relative success of British institutions in providing freedom and securing social order. Thus, the consensus in which Macdonald and his peers were operating was largely based in the ideas of the Court Whigs.¹⁷³ There was no need for debate. That placed them in opposition

¹⁷⁰ S.F. Wise, *God’s Peculiar Peoples: Essays on Political Culture in Nineteenth-Century Canada*, (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1993), 15. See also Carl Berger, *The Sense of Power*, 103. Berger said that the conservative mind in general is reluctant to engage in political speculation and has an aversion to openly theorizing.

¹⁷¹ Peter J. Smith, “The Ideological Genesis of Canadian Confederation,” Ph.D. diss., Carleton University, 1983, 4.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ See Peter J. Smith, “The Ideological Origins of Canadian Confederation,” *Canada’s Origins: Liberal, Tory, or Republican?*, eds. Janet Ajzenstat and Peter J. Smith, (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1995), 47-78.

to the Country Whigs whose legacy would be the civic republicanism of Jefferson's Republican Party and later Canada's Reform Party. Indeed, the lack of an explicitly-stated ideology might in itself be characterized as Burkean.

Unlike his friend D'Arcy McGee, Macdonald did not explicitly identify himself as Burkean. In the absence of such strong proof this dissertation has combed through the historical record in search of statements and actions that could be characterized as Burkean. The cherry-picking fallacy comes into play here. Finding something that you set out to look for is different from discovering something unexpected. Certainly, Macdonald could on occasion sound quite Burkean, such as when he based his defense of primogeniture on its historical benefits. Earlier in this chapter I showed that Macdonald defended his positions on democracy and on the federal-provincial arrangement of powers by referring to lessons learned from the American experience. He was talking like Burke. But was he aware of that? Again, we cannot know with certainty. Isolating select statements made by Macdonald that happen to agree with parts of Burke's political philosophy does not mean that he was a Burkean in any meaningful or systematic way.

This brings us to the coherence fallacy, described in the Introduction as the intellectual historian's predisposition to find systematic ideologies with causal implications in the historical record. That was the original impetus behind this dissertation, making its failure to discover a coherent Burkean legacy all the more telling. It leads to the related problem of inter-contextual coherence, the temptation to treat ideologies as transhistorical agents. In its simplest form this problem arises if one assumes that concepts such as "trustee" and "democracy," discussed under part two of the Burkean Test, and "liberty" under part three, had the same meanings in Burke's and Macdonald's times.

It gets more complicated when considering Burke's unique legacy, discussed above in

Chapter Two. Burke meant very different things to different generations of politicians and thinkers and was used and abused very often out of context. By the time Macdonald had established himself at the head of the Confederation forces, Burke was being claimed most vociferously by Utilitarian liberals like John Morley. To them, Burkeanism meant above all expediency in political decision-making. Is that what it meant to Macdonald? Possibly. We have seen how Macdonald had eschewed ideological rigidity and abstraction while repeatedly emphasising practical goals. More often than not, he compromised to get things done. That certainly fit with what Utilitarians thought of Burke. Again, however, without an explicit statement from Macdonald, there is no way to know how he understood Burke.

Such considerations recommend further consideration of the differences between the historical contexts of Burke and Macdonald. Burke's positive prescriptions were no longer directly relevant to Britain after the 1832 Reform Act. That was arguable, at least according to Burke admirers like Morley, who were still contending after the Second Reform Act (1867) that the pre-*Reflections* works had remained a perfect manual for aspiring statesmen. What is not arguable, however, is that there would have been even less direct relevance to Macdonald, who was operating in a far different historical, geographic, and economic context. I will now discuss some of the ways in which their contexts differed, and why that decreases the usefulness of labelling Macdonald as Burkean.

Politically, Burke's Britain was the centre of a colonial empire that governed Ireland, British North America, West Africa, and much of India and the Caribbean, and which controlled much of global trade routes through its powerful navy. The British Empire during Burke's lifetime was a global military and economic power. In contrast, Macdonald's Canada was a young colony, only granted responsible self-government in 1848. It had always been at the

mercy of imperial politicians who knew little or nothing (and usually cared less) about Canadian interests and concerns. Britain's decision, in the 1840s, to abandon tariff protection for its colonies, for example, dealt a significant blow to the Canadian economy and led to calls for Canada to leave the Empire.

Canada was also at the political and economic mercy of its southern neighbour. By 1861, the American population had grown to approximately thirty-one million, ten times that of the combined population of the colonies north of the border. Since the War of 1812 the U.S. military had grown considerably, a trend that was accelerated by the Civil War. Meanwhile, the British had been drawing down the number of regular troops stationed in North America, and Canadian plans for its militia defense were laughably inadequate. The Union Army may have been exhausted by the spring of 1865, but it could still have easily taken Canada.

Finally, the refusal of the U.S. government in 1866 to renew the expiring Reciprocity Treaty forced the realization that the Canadian economy remained dependent on the goodwill of its southern neighbour.¹⁷⁴ The eternal quest to remedy that disadvantage eventually led to the strategy of raising tariff rates to protect and foster the growth of domestic industry, otherwise known as Macdonald's "National Policy." His ability to implement a Burkean vision, then, was limited because of outside factors which were beyond the control of any one individual.

Above all, Macdonald was working in an environment shaped by an emergent industrial

¹⁷⁴ The treaty, which was signed in 1854, established free trade between the British North American colonies and the United States on many products. It remained popular until the U.S. Civil War when, for a number of reasons, protectionist opponents of the agreement on each side but especially in the United States, won the argument to terminate it. See, for example, D.C. Masters, *The Reciprocity Treaty of 1854: its History, its Relation to British Colonial and Foreign Policy and to the Development of Canadian Fiscal Autonomy*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1963), and Robert E. Ankli, "The Reciprocity Treaty of 1854," *Canadian Journal of Economics* 4, no. 1 (February 1971): 1-20.

capitalism, a context wholly unimaginable to Burke. Burke seemed hardly to have noticed the origins of this other, more far-reaching revolution that was changing the historical realities he took for granted.¹⁷⁵ Nothing from his final published writings indicates that he regarded Britain as anything other than a commercial-agricultural economy marked by stable prosperity, as it had been all his life. Hence, his economic views reflected the fundamentals of that system. It explains, for instance, why he could not be disabused of the notion that hunger and poverty were part of the Providential design.¹⁷⁶

The particular form of limited democracy and aristocratic control standard in Burke's era did not long continue past the first two decades of the nineteenth century because the class hierarchy that had sustained it was weakened. One of the important early effects of the Industrial Revolution in Britain was the creation of a new, literate bourgeois class that demanded access to political power. It had the effect of adding to the list of things government would be responsible for, such as public schools, and soon the demands placed upon governments had grown too numerous and complex to be left to a handful of well-intentioned aristocrats and learned gentlemen.¹⁷⁷ In Canada, which had always lacked a natural aristocracy, nineteenth century politics was long dominated by small merchant capitalists even if they were consistently subject to the rule of the Colonial Office until 1848.

¹⁷⁵ RA. Smith, "Burke's Crusade Against the French Revolution: Principles and Prejudices," in *Edmund Burke: The Enlightenment and the Modern World*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis, (Detroit: University of Detroit Press, 1967), 34, 36.

¹⁷⁶ Burke was a friend of Scottish economist Adam Smith, and like Smith, he (mostly) believed that the economy was best left to the free market. When food scarcity threatened Britain's impoverished workers in 1794-95, Burke, though sympathetic, warned against imprudent tinkering which he argued could make the problem worse. See Edmund Burke, *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, (London: F. and C. Rivington, 1800). Burke had originally written and presented these thoughts to prime minister William Pitt in November, 1795.

¹⁷⁷ Kirk, *Genius Reconsidered*, 76-7.

Economic development was propelled by the growth of capitalist investment in projects that applied technological innovation to the exploitation of natural and human resources. By the 1860s, this had produced “the rise of the factory, the increasing use of steam power,” and mechanization in tailoring, and boot and shoe production.¹⁷⁸ Mechanization eliminated much of the work previously done by skilled craftsmen, forcing them into low-wage jobs as common labourers, or worse, unemployment.

Macdonald had to deal with two socio-economic conditions unknown to Burke. For one, Britain had never experienced the kind of mass immigration Canada would throughout the nineteenth-century, first in the 1820s and then again during the Irish Famine of the 1840s and 1850s. For Canadian leaders, that exacerbated the problems of social integration, especially because most of the Irish who arrived were Catholic and thus renewed fears of Catholic domination in the English, Protestant community.

Second, it created conflicts between labour and capital. Recognizing its strength, labour began organizing. The organization of labour was practically unthinkable in eighteenth century Britain. In Canada, however, as a merchant bourgeoisie grew in political power it nevertheless faced class consciousness and trade unionism from its work force. In the 1830s, organized labour had become strong enough to alarm some Montreal capitalists. The *Gazette*, the mouthpiece of capital, “spewed hatred of the working class” and defined labourers as property.¹⁷⁹ Another newspaper printed a letter that echoed such support for merchant capital. The unidentified writer encouraged merchants to “exercise the control which you are entitled, nay bound, to exercise,

¹⁷⁸ Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan Palmer, “The Bonds of Unity: The Knights of Labour in Ontario, 1880-1900,” in *Workers and Canadian History*, ed. Gregory S. Kealey, (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995), 244.

¹⁷⁹ Charles Lipton, *The Trade Union Movement of Canada: 1827-1959*, (Montreal: Canadian Social Publications Ltd., 1966), 10.

over those to whom you afford the means of daily sustenance.”¹⁸⁰

So, Macdonald had to respond to the growing voice of mass labour, which wanted job security and higher wages, and to the grievances of a capitalist class of which he was a prominent member, and which included many of his friends as well as political colleagues. Moreover, his options for dealing with the demands of each side were limited. In all likelihood, strengthening the staples economy with infrastructure development was his best and only option in that, hopefully, it would bring more capital and settlement in a virtuous cycle that would develop the economy.

In sum, the old paradigm of Court Whig vs. Country Whig in which Burke had operated was a thing of the past. Still influential in Canadian politics earlier in the century, it had now given way to a new liberal capitalist order. The failed rebellions of 1837-38 could be interpreted as the death knell of civic republicanism in Canada. As historian Ian McKay has argued, by the mid-nineteenth century a “liberal order framework” based around a “belief in the epistemological and ontological primacy of the category ‘individual’” was the new hegemonic ideology.¹⁸¹ The new liberalism entailed a radically different conceptualization of governing in which Burke’s ideas were less and less relevant.

Finally, Macdonald had also to contend with the emergence of “public opinion” as a “new form of authority.”¹⁸² The growth of a robust deliberative democracy in which voters rationally deliberated the issues of the day had, by the early 1840s when Macdonald was beginning his political career, “swept away the original understanding of Upper Canada’s

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ Ian McKay, “The Liberal Order Framework,” *Canadian Historical Review* 81, no. 4 (December 2000): 624.

¹⁸² Jeffrey L. McNairn, *The Capacity to Judge: Public Opinion and Deliberative Democracy in Upper Canada, 1791-1854*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 16.

constitution.”¹⁸³ The new “public opinion” required new understandings of what constituted good government and a healthy social structure. This was a socio-political context that Burke had not anticipated and about which he had little to say.

Analysis of primary historical evidence reveals no substantive proof that the ideas and principles set forth by Edmund Burke were a definitive influence in Canada during the critical years of nation-building. Thomas D’Arcy McGee may have declared himself Burkean, but he was arguably not as integral to Confederation as Macdonald, Brown, or even Galt. At Charlottetown and Quebec City, those three did most of the talking, and they had designed the draft resolutions of the BNA Act.

In a general sense, the intellectual climate in Canada had a Burkean flavour because he had left an indelible mark on British political thought. Yet was that all the Burkanadians were trying to say? They surely meant that the imprimatur of Burke had been indelibly stamped on Canada. That Macdonald was a Burkean was part of that claim.

Yet the historical record on Macdonald reveals nothing of the sort. There were no declarations that he had devoted himself to any political school other than that of “progress,” by which he usually meant economic growth. Hallmarks of Burkean rhetoric were absent from Macdonald’s plainspoken pragmatism. A signature metaphor about the “ship of state,” for instance, might have at the least provided some corroboration, however flimsy, of the Burkean assertion.

To sum up, then, my research did not find that Macdonald made use of, or reference to, a doctrine of thought based on the planks set out in the Burkean test. But again, this is because they had little direct applicability to Macdonald and the circumstances in which he governed.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 16, 17.

Government could not be left with the aristocracy because Canada did not have one, and the democratic tradition in North America demanded greater participation among the uneducated and poorer classes. There was rarely an occasion that fit the direct invocation of a Burkean principle.

This conclusion comes from applying the methodology of intellectual history. As I have discussed, that approach is limited because it evacuates individuals from the material contexts that condition ideas and beliefs. Macdonald's ideas were probably conditioned more by his political and economic context than by a Burkean system of political thought. The next chapter explores this proposition by tendering an alternative explanatory framework for Confederation: that it was an economic project motivated by the interests of capital in Britain and British North America. Thus, instead of starting from the question "what *ideas* did Macdonald act upon?" Chapter Five treats Macdonald's political ideas, and the Confederation project, as the outcome of the political and economic realities of British North America in his era.

CHAPTER FIVE: SOMETHING BORROWED, SOMETHING BURKE

Introduction

Despite repeated attempts over the years by embarrassed cultural nationalists to ennoble the union of British North American colonies in 1867 as something profound or inspired, the accepted wisdom has long been that Confederation is best understood when laid bare as an economic project, albeit one on a grand scale.

Ironically, given their later claims about Burke, that was how conservative nationalist scholars Creighton and Morton had previously, in the 1930s-40s, explained it. Indeed, they had considered economics to be the central theme of Canada's political and institutional development. Trained as political economists, and building on the work of Harold Adams Innis, both had attributed the emergence of the Canadian nation-state to the unique geography of British North America and the economic system that had developed out of it. Interestingly, then, while they eventually privileged intellectual influences, early on they had analysed Canadian history, including Confederation, within the theoretical framework of political economy.

Such an approach was considered new in Canada, but in fact it was modelled on an American example set decades before by the Progressive school. At Columbia University, historian Charles Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913) had recast the ratification of the American Constitution in light of the class struggle between creditors and debtors in the thirteen colonies.¹ What's more, even Innis's claim that the character of the Canadian state had been shaped by continental geography was not unique; in

¹ Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, (New York: Macmillan, 1913).

1893 American historian Frederick Jackson Turner had published his thesis that the western frontier lent a distinctive democratic and independent character to U.S. politics.²

In light of this, it turns out that the post-war Burkanadians were following a long Canadian tradition of borrowing and adapting intellectual trends from south of the border to distinguish Canada from the U.S. and justify its separate existence on the continent. The irony of copying from the U.S. to differentiate Canada from the U.S. seemed to be lost on them.

This chapter proceeds in three parts. In the first, Confederation is explained using the theoretical framework supplied by political economy. Drawing largely on the work of Innis and his contemporaries, it explains that the staples economy, based on the extraction and transportation of raw materials from the continental interior to the industrialized metropolises of Europe, needed significant investment of capital for the construction of a transcontinental railway. On its own, the Province of Canada could not obtain the needed capital from foreign lenders, but together, all of the British North American colonies were large enough to secure the loans.

The chapter continues by demonstrating the practical benefits of incorporation for parties to the agreement. Domestically, the BNA Act financially benefitted the Montreal and Toronto capitalists invested in staples as well as the small merchant class that had established businesses integrated into that economy. Incorporation lightened the public debt burden of each colony and promised to open up new regions to forestry and agriculture as well as to encourage immigration to foster settlement and increase the size of the domestic market. Macdonald and the politicians foresaw how such growth would strengthen their electoral prospects, but they, too, personally

² Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *The Frontier in American History*, (New York: Henry Holt, 1920).

stood to gain financially since most had invested in the public work projects that depended on the foreign capital Confederation secured. Lenders in Britain would profit from the return on their investments, and British politicians could ease the strain on taxpayers burdened heretofore with spending for the military defence of the continent. This was the way of progress, and if it involved nation building that brought glory and a claim on posterity, so much the better.

That is a more plausible rationale than the belief that Macdonald's nation-building efforts were following a wholistic Burkean system of political thought. The leading Burkanadians once knew this. As the chapter then shows, they made the same arguments in their earlier histories of Canada. It was the conclusion they had drawn when they conducted extensive primary research on the topic.

Part two of the chapter positions Canadian historiographical trends in relation to their American antecedents, demonstrating the pattern whereby historical fashions at the intellectual metropole eventually took hold north of the border. The Laurentian thesis, for example, may be viewed as the Canadian equivalent to Turner's Frontier Thesis. In their respective historiographies, both the U.S. and Canada claimed that their unique nation had emerged out of human interaction with geography.

Since Burke was cited mostly by conservatives, the second part of the chapter situates the Burkean claim within the broader "Tory Touch" theme. It contended that Canada's cultural and political distinctiveness, indeed its superiority, in comparison to the United States, had come from the influence of Loyalists who were British Tories. That mythology had weakened by the mid-twentieth century as continentalism and, by extension, American liberalism grew more influential in Canada. Invoking Burke, an icon of both the British tradition and modern conservatism, was an attempt by English-Canadian nationalist intellectuals who were worried

about the decline of Canada's British identity to reinvigorate conservative nationalism in Canada.

The chapter concludes by placing the postwar Burkean claim along the continuum in which Canada's historians borrowed from their U.S. counterparts. As I explained in Chapter Two, Burke's reputation had been revived by American conservatives in the 1940s. It was part of a more general scholarly turn to the importance of ideas, motivated by a deeply-felt sense of urgency to defend and ennoble liberal-democratic institutions under conditions of the Cold War. In Canada, the threat was less the Soviet Union than continental political, economic, and cultural integration that portended the loss of a distinctive national identity. Ironically, then, while the Burkean claim was (and continues to be) used to signify something distinct, and usually superior, about Canadian institutions or political culture, it is yet another example of Canadians replicating an American model. It was a case of Canadian historians resisting Americanization using an American historiographical discourse.

All Politics is Railways – The Political Economic Explanation for Confederation

That Confederation was in the main a project of economic advancement is indicated by the inclusion of the railway clause in the BNA Act.³ The guarantee of a finished Intercolonial, connecting Halifax overland to the other provinces, was essential to securing the support of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, but it was also viewed as critical to central Canadian development. That railway, and the massive Canadian Pacific Railway that followed, facilitated the importation of goods but, more importantly, enabled exportation of Canadian staples.

All other considerations were secondary to strengthening the operation of an economy

³ Section X, clause 145. See *BNA Act*, 1867.

that depended on transportation infrastructure. It was an economic system that was later famously explained by Innis's Staples Thesis in *The Fur Trade* (1930).⁴ Staples offered a ground-breaking economic interpretation of Canadian history that Innis used to "correlate a wide range of political and social developments and explain the character of major institutions within Canada."⁵ It quickly became "a primary body of knowledge and research on the development of Canadian capitalism from its pre-industrial origins to the end of the National Policy."⁶

The staples thesis is a useful lens through which to explain the operation of the Canadian economy up until approximately 1870. Though it is not without its limitations and pitfalls, it nevertheless provides a powerful explanatory approach to the political and economic environment in which Confederation was worked out.⁷

Since European contact, Innis said, life in Canada had been dictated by its status as the economic hinterland for imperial metropolises – first France, and then Britain. Early commerce

⁴ The book was originally published in 1930, but throughout I use the revised edition from 1956. See Harold Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History*, rev. ed., (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1956).

⁵ Kenneth Buckley, "The Role of the Staple Industries in Canada's Economic Development," *The Journal of Economic History* 18, no. 4 (December 1958): 442.

⁶ Daniel Drache, "Rediscovering Canadian Political Economy," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 11, no. 3 (August 1976): 7.

⁷ The limitations of the staples thesis have been well-documented. Major criticism has targeted its neglect of women, Indigenous peoples, and the working-class. Innis's analysis of the fur trade, for instance, said little that was substantive about the important contributions of Indigenous peoples. See Gustavus Myers, *History of Canadian Wealth*, (New York: Argosy-Antiquarian, 1968), 134. According to Myers, the original inhabitants were the "real producers of the huge wealth" from the fur trade. The working-class habitants of Quebec also seemed to have been "virtually outside the national economy" that Innis described. See Paul Phillips, Introduction to *Labour and Capital in Canada, 1650-1860*, by H.C. Pentland, ed. Paul Phillips, (Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1981), x, and Kenneth Buckley, "The Role of the Staple Industries in Canada's Economic Development," 447. Such absences weakened the analytic power of staples. That said, the point here is not to dwell on such shortcomings but rather to argue that although the staples thesis may have painted in broad strokes, it was an accurate portrayal of the most important dynamic of the Canadian economy.

had involved harvesting local resources which could be “obtained with little difficulty in sufficient quantity” and for which there was a demand in imperial markets.⁸ In the Maritimes, an abundance of cod stimulated the rise of a fishing industry. In the North American interior, a fur trade developed between the settlers of New France and Indigenous peoples. That trade was driven by an “insatiable demand” of settlers and Indigenous “hunting peoples” for European goods “of a more advanced and specialized technology.”⁹ The pursuit of beaver fur pelts became crucial to the northern economy, and in fact had grown so large that by the mid-nineteenth-century beavers had been hunted almost to extinction.

Abundant natural resources, however, guaranteed that even as some staples were depleted, others replaced them. Fur declined, but by mid-century “lumber became the product which brought the largest returns” in trade.¹⁰ In the extensive forests of Quebec and Ontario, particularly in the Ottawa Valley, the “white pine stands” had been stripped “for the building of American cities.”¹¹ There was also a wheat boom, which had led to “a feverish exploitation of the ... soil of western Canada.”¹² Whatever the resource, the result was always the same in that “agriculture, industry, transportation, trade, finance, and governmental activities” of the colonies all tended to become subordinate to “the production of the staple.”¹³

The staples economy had always been conducted on terms favourable to the centre of empire. Leaving Canada in raw form, resources were refined in France and Britain into value-

⁸ Innis, *Fur Trade in Canada*, 384.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 388.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 384.

¹¹ W.L. Morton, “The West and Confederation, 1857-1871,” *The Canadian Historical Association Booklets*, no. 9, (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1968), 6.

¹² *Ibid.* It is worth remembering, however, that at that time, “western Canada” referred to the westernmost parts of Upper Canada near Windsor, Sarnia, and London.

¹³ Innis, *Fur Trade in Canada*, 385.

added products that were then sold back to Canadian consumers. This stimulated technological innovation and spurred the growth of heavy industry at the metropole, priming “the industrial pump of the imperialist economy,” while hindering such progress in Canada.¹⁴

It had consequences for settlement, as well. The fur trade, for example, had required ships “especially adapted for handling heavy manufactured goods” to take across the Atlantic for trade with Indigenous peoples.¹⁵ It left little to no room for prospective settlers to make the voyage.¹⁶ Then, since the ships were loaded only with furs for the return voyage, there was plenty of room for passengers out of British North America. The fur trade specifically, then, had meant a “heavy drain on settlement.”¹⁷

The export of staples had depended first upon vast networks of lakes, rivers, and streams, and then on railroads. From the start, individual colonies were forced to finance canals and other infrastructure themselves, often “at heavy initial cost,” since private capital on the scale of what was needed was simply unavailable.¹⁸ Borrowing the funds, however, led to the kind of financial problems “involved in heavy expenditures.”¹⁹ The surplus capital generated from the export of staples was directed to repaying lenders; little to no capital was left in the domestic economy for

¹⁴ Drache, “Rediscovering Canadian Political Economy,” 8.

¹⁵ Harold Innis, *Problems of Staple Production in Canada*, (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1933), 6.

¹⁶ Admittedly, this seems a weak argument for claiming the lack of settlement. There were, of course, many other ships bound for North America on which immigrants travelled. Still, Innis’ point is taken that an economy based on nomadic life was less desirable for potential immigrants than the agricultural settlement already underway in the American colonies.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* Since the trade in lumber favoured a return cargo of immigrants, the transition from fur to lumber resulted in increased immigration. See R.T. Naylor, “The Rise and Fall of the Third Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence,” in *Capitalism and the National Question in Canada*, ed. Gary Teeple, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972). As Naylor explained, the timber trade turned “the cargo imbalance in favour of cheap emigration to Canada,” leading, for example, to the arrival of “crowds of impoverished . . . Irish immigrants” to supply the economy with cheap labour (*Ibid.*, 6).

¹⁸ Innis, *Problems of Staple Production in Canada*, 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

industrialization. Thus, even during periods of prosperity, most of the surplus revenue collected by governments was funnelled back to foreign lenders to repay capital that had been borrowed at “heavy interest charges.”²⁰

This was the economic state of things when the delegates from each of the colonies, including Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island, gathered in September and October of 1864. On their own, the British North American colonies had consistently struggled to raise capital and were unable to achieve sustained economic growth in competition with more advanced industrialized nations.²¹ They were “pioneer” economies blessed “by the relative plentifulness of resources” yet beset by serious scarcities of capital and labour.²²

Confederation promised “a larger unit of government,” and with it “broader financial resources and the greater borrowing power necessary to carry out still more ambitious railway policies” such as, eventually, the Canadian Pacific.²³ The Imperial government, for example, agreed to guarantee most of the loan for the Intercolonial only in the context of a larger union when it had refused to do so for the Province of Canada on its own.²⁴

The expectation was that the construction of the Intercolonial Railway and other public works, made possible by the infusion of vast quantities of borrowed capital, would strengthen the

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

²¹ Donald Creighton, *British North America at Confederation*, (Ottawa: King’s Printer, 1939), 61.

²² W.A. Mackintosh, “Some Aspects of a Pioneer Economy,” *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 2, no. 4 (November 1936): 457-58.

²³ W.A. Mackintosh, *The Economic Background of Dominion-Provincial Relations*, (Ottawa: King’s Printer, 1939), 14.

²⁴ Sir Joseph Pope, *Memoirs of the Right Honourable Sir John Alexander Macdonald*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1894), 2:6. See also Stanley B. Ryerson, *Unequal Union: Roots of Crisis in the Canadas, 1815-1873*, (Toronto: Progress Books, 1973), 323-25. As Ryerson explained, similar attempts at that time to secure more financing for the other major railway in Canada – the Grand Trunk – had also failed.

economy by increasing the capacity to move resources and people across the country. Increased exports would mean greater profits and therefore domestic capital available for investment in industrialization; and population growth, aided by the more efficient and comfortable transportation of immigrants, would mean a larger and therefore stronger internal market. British North Americans would purchase less from outside the country and more from within it, ensuring that the additional capital generated by a stronger staples economy would remain in the country.²⁵ Confederation would kick off a virtuous cycle of domestic economic development.

In Nova Scotia, for instance, it was assumed that the union “would provide an enlarged market for tariff-protected industry.”²⁶ At that time heavy machinery was powered by coal, and Nova Scotians were eager to capitalize on the abundance of that resource in their province. Proponents of Confederation there reasoned that in the new union their province would naturally be the centre of manufacturing and would within a few years become almost the sole national supplier for the kinds of finished products that previously had to be obtained from Europe or the

²⁵ Founders of the Canadian political economy tradition differed on whether that strategy would lead to Canada’s full development. On one hand, Innis argued that Canada would never be able to transcend its basic role as a raw materials supplier in the world economy and would therefore remain dependent for capital and manufactured goods upon an imperial centre, which by the mid-twentieth century had shifted from Britain to the United States. W.A. Mackintosh, on the other hand, believed that export of raw materials had been the only viable path Canada could take toward economic diversification and full development. See Daniel Drache, “Staple-ization: A Theory of Canadian Capitalist Development,” in *Imperialism, Nationalism, and Canada: Essays from the Marxist Institute of Toronto*, ed. John Saul and Craig Heron, (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1977), 20. Since the 1970s, the dominant trend, popularized by those like Drache and Mel Watkins, in left-nationalist Canadian political economy has been to use Innis’ staples approach to explain Canada’s continued underdevelopment and dependency. However, Paul Kellogg has recently offered a strong critique of this trend, arguing that while “it is one thing to make such a claim with reference to the early years of development,” there is no evidence that “Canadian manufacturing suffered permanent structural underdevelopment” because of a “staples-trap” (Paul Kellogg, *Escape from the Staple Trap: Canadian Political Economy After Left Nationalism*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 190, 209).

²⁶ Jakob Johann Benjamin Forster, *A Conjunction of Interests: Business, Politics, and Tariffs, 1825-1879*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 61.

United States.²⁷

Thus, to the sober-minded it has generally been acknowledged that, as Quebec historian Alfred Dubuc observed, “the first concern of the Canadian constitution was economic.”²⁸ The “men who shaped Confederation” were, after all, “the political spokesmen of the banking, trading and railway interests – the rising Canadian capitalist class,” and were themselves “men of property, concerned with property.”²⁹ The language they used when discussing Confederation consistently reflected that reality. Little was said about Burke, but plenty of speeches were dedicated to the prosperity that Confederation supposedly promised to all involved.

At Quebec City, Alexander Galt said that the “commercial energies” of “this country” had been depressed “because we had hitherto been confined to two markets – England and the United States.”³⁰ Colonial union would energize commerce, Galt said, since “a union with the Lower Provinces would not only give us the benefit of their local markets but would also open up to us the benefit of foreign trade.”³¹ He added that “to encourage manufacturing in Canada,” a “supply of coal was a most important element of success,” and that “we had before us the fact that Nova Scotia possessed that element.”³²

As the previous chapter demonstrated, Macdonald had repeatedly emphasised the

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Alfred Dubuc, “The Decline of Confederation and the New Nationalism,” in *Nationalism in Canada*, ed. Peter Russell (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 115-16.

²⁹ Ryerson, *Unequal Union*, 355.

³⁰ A.T. Galt, “Speech to the Quebec Conference,” October 15, 1864, in Hon. Edward Whelan, *The Union of the British Provinces*, (Gardenvale, Quebec: Garden City Press, 1927), 85. In that context, “this country” referred to the Province of Canada, while the “Lower Provinces” meant the Maritime colonies of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland (though of course the latter two did not enter Confederation until 1873 and 1949, respectively).

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

immediate material benefits promised by the proposed union. Toasting the progress made at Charlottetown, he said the union would surely enhance individual and collective prosperity.³³ The next month, at Quebec, he argued that an organized confederacy of British North American colonies would become more profitable, “from a money point of view,” than Australia, then the richest colony in the Empire.³⁴ Then when the seventy-two resolutions of the Quebec Conference were submitted to the Canadian legislature for debate, Macdonald defended the scheme on the basis that Canada’s credit standing and hope for material prosperity depended upon it.³⁵

The highly-centralized form of government laid out in the BNA Act is also telling. When he began to seriously consider the merger, Macdonald expressed his preference for a legislative union. That was the British model; a federated nation was American. A centralized federation was his compromise. It kept most of the important powers to national leaders while safeguarding local religious and educational customs.³⁶

Yet aside from a general “British is best” attitude, Macdonald was as likely motivated by pressure from the powerful St. Lawrence merchants who lobbied for delegating most “economic powers, including the important authority to regulate trade and commerce,” to the national legislature.³⁷ Canadian merchants had argued for “a strong political unity, in government by the

³³ Macdonald, “Speech to the Banquet in Charlottetown,” September 8, 1864, in Whelan, *The Union of the British Provinces*, (Gardenvale, Quebec: Garden City Press, 1927), 7-8.

³⁴ Macdonald, Quebec City, October 11, 1864, “Hewitt Bernard’s Notes on the Quebec Conference, 11-25 October, 1864,” in *Documents on the Confederation of British North America*, ed. G.P. Browne, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969), 95.

³⁵ Macdonald, Debates, *Parliament of the United Province of Canada, 8th Parliament, 3rd Session*, February 6, 1865, in *Canada Transformed*, ed. Sarah Katherine Gibson and Arthur Milnes, 151.

³⁶ Donald Creighton, *The Road to Confederation: The Emergence of Canada, 1863-1867*, (Toronto: Macmillan, 1964), 143-45.

³⁷ Creighton, *British North America at Confederation*, 50.

commercially minded” and “institutions which would protect and advance their interests.”³⁸ This was especially important because the expected influx of “capital investment on a large scale necessitated more direct responsibility and supervision and more adequate methods of finance.”³⁹ The “large centralized organizations characteristic of the fur trade” – the monopolies of New France, Hudson’s Bay Company, and the Northwest Company – had provided the template for a successful commercial operation, a template followed in the creation of the BNA Act.⁴⁰

Then there is also the fact that many champions of Confederation were themselves personally invested in railroads, the economic sector that stood to receive the most investment from government-backed loans.⁴¹ Both Galt and Cartier, for example, held ownership stakes in the Grand Trunk Railway and served on its board.⁴² Among the many company directorships Macdonald held was that of the Cataraqui and Peterborough Railway Company.⁴³

British lenders, such as Barings, were strong supporters of union because they would profit handsomely from their loans to the new country.⁴⁴ It is notable that City of London investors and the British bond markets reacted positively to the prospect of Confederation in the wake of the Quebec Resolutions.⁴⁵ As in Canada, the business and political communities often had like political and economic interests. Barings in particular had been instrumental in crafting

³⁸ Donald Creighton, *The Empire of the St. Lawrence*, (Boston: Mifflin, 1956), 222.

³⁹ Harold Innis, *Essays in Canadian Economic History*, ed. Mary Q. Innis, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1956), 117.

⁴⁰ Innis, *Fur Trade in Canada*, 390.

⁴¹ Creighton, *British North America at Confederation*, 15.

⁴² Dubuc, “The Decline of Confederation and the New Nationalism,” 114. See also Ryerson, *Unequal Union*, 322-23.

⁴³ J.K. Johnson, “John A. Macdonald and the Kingston Business Community,” in *To Preserve and Defend: Essays on Kingston in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Gerald Tulchinsky, (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1976), 153.

⁴⁴ Creighton, *British North America at Confederation*, 9-10. As Creighton noted, there had been heavy British investment in Canadian municipal bonds and Grand Trunk Railway securities.

⁴⁵ Footnote in Sarah Katherine Gibson and Arthur Milnes, eds., *Canada Transformed*, 153.

the Imperial government's preferences for the design of the Canadian constitution.⁴⁶

In sum, the union was conceived as a strategy to solve the stagnated, staples-based economies of the colonies. The infrastructure that supported each of the colonial economies was financed by debt, and they had generally been unable to shed that debt and proceed on a path to development. The larger unit of government, along with a railway between Ontario and Halifax, would bring full development and lessen dependence on the metropolises for manufactured and refined goods.

Unlike the Burkean claim, this explanation of Confederation is grounded in historical evidence. It is also how Creighton and Morton, before a later turn to unabashed conservative nation-building, had explained the origins of the Canadian state.⁴⁷ In the next section, I discuss how each had used economic analyses to explain historical events.

Building on Staples – Creighton and the Laurentian Thesis

Innis's staples history ultimately concluded that the Canadian state owed its existence to its unique geography; it had emerged not in spite of it (until then a widely-shared romantic notion), but because of it.⁴⁸ Yet, owing partly to Innis's difficult style, his insight needed clarification and popularization. He had laid the foundation in *The Fur Trade in Canada*, but more detail was needed to really flesh out the connections between the economics and the politics, especially during the nineteenth century. How did the needs of the northern commercial

⁴⁶ Dubuc, "The Decline of Confederation and the New Nationalism," 115. In fact, Baring's "were the official financial agents of the Canadian Government in London," and since 1840 "had played a leading part in mobilizing British capital for investment in Canada" (Ryerson, *Unequal Union*, 323).

⁴⁷ Notably, the foregoing discussion used *Empire of the St. Lawrence* and *British North America at Confederation*.

⁴⁸ Innis, *Fur Trade in Canada*, 393.

system, for example, inform the political motivations of the merchants who controlled it? How did those needs conflict with the priorities of the non-commercial class?

These questions would be addressed by Donald Creighton in *The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence* (1937). Like Innis, Creighton argued that Canada had developed from a distinct northern commercial system based on the exploitation of staples. The original fur-trading organization of the French, he said, had been the elementary expression of the major architectural style of Canadian business life, a style inspired by an expansionist drive westward along the St. Lawrence River system into the continental interior. Even as British merchants inherited control, after the Conquest, of this vast commercial empire, the main trend of development – the westward drive of corporations – could not be altered because it was the environment (and not the people) that determined the system. The French and then the British were only ever its operators, benefitting from the commercial system but also bending to its needs in order to do so.⁴⁹

Whereas Innis had provided the broad strokes, Creighton's treatment of Canadian development enquired into the details. Eschewing the traditional explanations for the Upper Canada (1837) and Lower Canada (1837-1838) Rebellions, respectively, Creighton argued that the roots of each conflict in fact lay in larger struggles for political control between the powerful merchant classes who operated the northern commercial empire and the "small rural proprietors of both provinces."⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Creighton, *Empire of the St. Lawrence*, 14-20.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 125. Historically, the standard accounts of each rebellion stressed the frustrated attempts of reformers to moderate the political power of ruling cliques. For decades, the unelected Legislative Councils in each province had blocked the popularly-supported measures passed by the elected Legislative Assemblies, and by 1837 emotions had reached a breaking point. In Upper Canada, William Lyon Mackenzie and the Reform movement, inspired by democratic changes underway in Britain and the neighbouring American states, had been pushing

In Upper Canada, a conflict had been growing between “agriculture and commerce . . . farm-lands and trade routes.”⁵¹ The Family Compact, the group of Tories that ultimately dictated policy in the province, “was the party of commercialism,” and it “hungered to develop the country by private capital and public expenditure.”⁵² They were the political arm of the interests invested in the exploitation of staples, and as such they used public money to build the canals, roads, and bridges needed to support the system.

Yet the profits generated from harvesting and transporting staples largely accrued to the merchant class, a minority, even as the province repeatedly loaned money to troubled infrastructure projects like the Welland Canal.⁵³ The majority of the province’s voting public

aggressively for a more equalitarian social structure and fairer distribution of property that rewarded the virtues of initiative and hard work, and not social standing. See, for instance, Gerald Craig, *Upper Canada: The Formative Years*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1963). In Lower Canada, there had long been social and ethnic tensions between the French-Canadian majority, which dominated the elected Assembly, and the English-speaking minority that controlled the appointed Council. The 1837-38 Rebellion was typically explained as an explosion of pent-up French-Canadian nationalism. See J.M.S. Careless, *The Union of the Canadas*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967). More recent scholarship has explained the rebellions in terms of the ideological conflict between the Court Whigs, classical liberals who were aligned with political and economic power, and Country Whigs, civic humanists who believed that concentrated power was corrupting and who idealized the small, independent landowner as virtuous. In that reading, for example, the Lower Canadian Rebellion was instigated by Papineau’s *Patriotes*, “elected representatives of a largely rural population” who modelled themselves after Jeffersonian and Jacksonian republicans in the U.S., and sought a confrontation with “the appointed representatives of the urban merchant class” allied to the governor to rid the continent of corrupt European institutions (Louis-Georges Harvey, “The First Distinct Society: French Canada, America, and the Constitution of 1791,” chap. 4 in *Canada’s Origins: Liberal, Tory, or Republican?* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1995), 85, 101).

⁵¹ Donald Creighton, “The Economic Background of the Rebellions of Eighteen Thirty-Seven,” *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 3, no. 3 (August 1937): 324.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ The brainchild of merchant William Hamilton Merritt (1793-1862), the Welland Canal was initially motivated by his desire to provide a regular flow of water to his many water-powered industries at Twelve Mile Creek. It then grew into a plan for connecting the Great Lakes and thereby strengthening the St. Lawrence transportation system. Incorporated in 1824, the Welland Canal Company, which oversaw construction of the canal, was consistently beset by financial problems and in need of assistance. See J.P. Merritt, *Biography of the Hon. W.H. Merritt, M.P.*,

were farmers, rural proprietors, and small landowners who supported these infrastructure projects with their taxes but did not directly benefit from them. Coalescing into the Reform Party, they argued that public revenues be used to benefit the majority; they resented the fact that a small, wealthy class benefitted from free infrastructure while imposing “intolerable burdens” upon the public purse.⁵⁴

In Lower Canada, the battle for control of state economic policies began as soon as the British assumed control of New France, in 1763. Newly-arrived English-speaking merchants, the “wealth, energy, and ability of the colony,” assumed control of the fur trade but “were jealously shut out from political control.”⁵⁵ They resented “the Francophil bureaucracy and the French-Canadian landowners” who were set on preserving the colony’s traditional ways of life and institutions, especially its feudal agricultural economy.⁵⁶

The new British owners of the Laurentian commercial empire were further upset when, in 1791, an unsympathetic and uninformed Westminster government partitioned Quebec.⁵⁷ Partitioning the province into Upper Canada and Lower Canada, the Constitutional Act, 1791 divided politically what was still one economic system; subsequently it became even more

of Lincoln, District of Niagara, (St. Catharines, Ontario: Leavenworth, 1875), and Roberta M. Styran and Robert R. Taylor, *This Great National Object: Building the Nineteenth-Century Welland Canals*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2012).

⁵⁴ Creighton, “The Economic Background of the Rebellions of Eighteen Thirty-Seven,” 325.

⁵⁵ Creighton, *Empire of the St. Lawrence*, 40.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ British North Americans had good reasons to consider the decision-makers in London ill-informed on North American geography. As Creighton explained, the St. Lawrence merchants believed British negotiators had been spineless and negligent in the Treaty of Paris, 1783. Overly generous to the U.S. because it enlarged their boundaries, it forever destroyed, Creighton said, the natural development of the Canadian commercial state. See Creighton, *Empire of the St. Lawrence*, 78-79. The historian Goldwin Smith also commented upon Canadians’ longstanding complaint that Britain had consistently sacrificed its interests in the name of keeping peace with the Americans. See Goldwin Smith, *Canada and the Canadian Question*, (London: Macmillan, 1891), 249-50.

difficult for merchants on both sides of the new border to coordinate development of transportation infrastructure and tariffs.⁵⁸

In Creighton's interpretation, the French-Canadians, mostly small-landholders and common labourers, had been angered by the English-speaking commercial class's success in increasing British immigration and land settlement, both of which had become big business. The merchants backed infrastructure projects, like canals, that used general tax revenues to promote their economic interests. Since first settling along the St. Lawrence, however, French-Canadians had been accustomed to "subsistence agriculture on feudal lines," and they resented the transformation of their traditional, centuries-old economy into the "large-scale trade in the new staples."⁵⁹

By the end of the War of 1812, merchants in each province had been entering "the executive and legislative councils" in "gradually increasing numbers." That had the effect of making the state "commercial in spirit and purpose," and it angered the agricultural communities because the "whole capital equipment . . . was in the hands of the commercial class." The "merchants owned the private vessels on the lakes and the *bateaux*, scows and Durham boats" used in transportation, as well as the "shops, mills, distilleries and tan-yards."⁶⁰

Merchants craved government monopoly control of the economy and pursued tariff and taxation policies that strengthened the profitability of staple trades. Conversely, rural farmers wanted local control of the economy and argued that government should spend only "on roads, bridges and locally useful public works" that benefitted the majority.⁶¹ Grand projects such as

⁵⁸ Creighton, *Empire of the St. Lawrence*, 301.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 273.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 125, 125, 126.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 127.

the Welland Canal did not fit that description; they were owned and operated by the commercial class even though they were largely paid for with public revenues.

While *Empire* had closed with Britain's abandonment of protection and colonial preferences and therefore the loss of the merchants' political power (which led to their 1849 annexation manifesto and the destruction of Montreal's Parliament buildings), Creighton extended his economic account of Canada's political development in his report for the Rowell-Sirois Commission. Though their trade had been disrupted and their empire had suffered heavy losses, the St. Lawrence-based business class not only continued to exist, but it found a new, continental, strategy for reviving its empire.

Their loss of tariff privileges made the St. Lawrence merchants look for new colonial outlets, and the rise of mechanized industry and transport, namely the railway, meant that a transcontinental union was a realistic possibility.⁶² Prior to the introduction of large-scale railway projects in British North America, the colonies had had little trade and common economic interests, but as the colonies transitioned, in the 1850s, from an era of wood, wind, and water to steel and steam, there was a realization that a political union could enhance the material prosperity of each colony.⁶³ The business class hoped that union would benefit their staple industries by widening provincial and international markets, but it was also part of a larger move from commercialism to industrial capitalism.⁶⁴

As Berger said, Creighton had explained Confederation as the creation of a "new dominion" that, "like the old commercial state, had its financial and commercial focus in the cities of the St. Lawrence" and which was characterized by the same "imperialistic ambition for

⁶² Creighton, *British North America at Confederation*, 5.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 47, 11.

western dominance” that had been the hallmark of the St. Lawrence “since the fur trade.”⁶⁵

Canada was a “kind of successor state,” in Creighton’s account, “to the commercial empire that had come crashing down in 1849.”⁶⁶

Creighton’s early economic approach to the interpretation of history, then, notably differed from his postwar emphasis upon the ideas of Burke.⁶⁷ In his early work, loyalty to Britain was explained as economic self-interest. The choice of St. Lawrence merchants to remain outside the then-new American nation was cast in terms of protecting “their own commercial system” which depended upon British capital and trade links.⁶⁸ They “were merchants before they were Britons, Protestants, or political theorists,” and their economic interests “dictated their main political demands.”⁶⁹

Morton and the Western Canadian Perspective

Early in his career, in the 1940s, Morton, too, argued that Confederation had not been brought about for anything like “the increase of liberty or the ends of justice,” but rather “to meet certain commercial, strategic, and imperial purposes.”⁷⁰ Noting that the “original themes of Canadian historical study,” survival and self-government, “were narrowly political” and “colonial,” he essentially agreed with the Laurentian thesis that Confederation was “the

⁶⁵ Berger, *Writing of Canadian History*, 215.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Historians Charles Taylor and Michael Cross noted this transition in Creighton’s view as well. As Taylor wrote, in his earlier books “Creighton had held that economics made Confederation inevitable,” while later Creighton saw it as “something brought about mainly by diplomacy and political cunning.” See Charles Taylor, *Radical Tories: The Conservative Tradition in Canada*, (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1982), 41.

⁶⁸ Creighton, *Empire of the St. Lawrence*, 58.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁷⁰ W.L. Morton, “Clio in Canada: The Interpretation of Canadian History,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (April 1946): 228.

metropolitan destiny of the St. Lawrence River . . . to exploit economically and unite politically the northern half of the continent.”⁷¹

Yet Morton had serious critiques of Laurentianism. For one, it was “too preoccupied with economic factors in the national history.”⁷² As an explanation for the existence of Canada, it “paid scant attention to the aspirations of the West, or to the need to establish just relations between the different regions and races.”⁷³ After all, he argued, there were “two nationalities and four geographical sections in the Canadian union,” and for all its brilliance in raising “Canadian history to major stature,” the Laurentian thesis had left out most of them.⁷⁴

As a westerner born and raised in Manitoba, Morton was also quick to critique the centralist bias of Innis and Creighton.⁷⁵ The implications of their thesis, he argued, were “a metropolitan economy, a political imperialism of the metropolitan area, and uniformity of the metropolitan culture throughout the hinterlands” of the west and the Maritime provinces.⁷⁶ Yet the historical experience of Canada’s hinterlands did not resemble that of metropolitan Canada, and so the Laurentian thesis served to make all “hinterland Canadians” aware of “sectional injustice.”⁷⁷

Morton argued that “Confederation was brought about to increase the wealth of Central Canada,” and that the west was annexed as a subordinate region, taking on the role of the exploited hinterland which it had since remained.⁷⁸ This was to be the recurring theme of his

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 230.

⁷³ Taylor, *Radical Tories*, 54.

⁷⁴ Morton, “Clio in Canada,” 231, 230.

⁷⁵ Taylor, *Radical Tories*, 54.

⁷⁶ Morton, “Clio in Canada,” 231.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* As he later pointed out, in the immediate post-Confederation years the best sources for timber and agriculture had already been exhausted, and staple exporters had to look further west,

contribution to the political economy tradition in Canada, namely the “centralizing tendencies of a staple-dominated development” and therefore the “internal metropolitan relationship between central Canada and the exploitation of the West.”⁷⁹ It was how he explained the sectionalism of the West, for example, in *The Progressive Party in Canada* (1950).⁸⁰ Toronto and Montreal merchants had set tax and tariff policies that favoured industrialization in central Canada but penalized Western farmers.

In sum, though he had noted the determinism of such an approach, Morton’s early work was in keeping with Innis, Creighton, and other economic interpretations of Canadian history and politics that positioned Confederation in particular as the result of impersonal economic forces. However, like Creighton, he too eventually altered his focus by the close of the 1950s, shifting to more “national themes” such as the importance of British traditions and conservatism in the creation and maintenance of the nation.⁸¹

Following American Trends

As Morton acknowledged, the Laurentian approach had achieved the “most enlightening” results yet in “Canadian historical scholarship.”⁸² It had introduced a new paradigm, based on the low but solid ground of economics and geography, for explaining national development. What made it especially compelling, however, was its usefulness to Canadian nationalism. By

to the North West, for new sources of key staples to grow their industries. See Morton, “The West and Confederation,” 6.

⁷⁹ Drache, “Rediscovering Canadian Political Economy,” 7.

⁸⁰ W.L. Morton, *The Progressive Party in Canada*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950).

⁸¹ Taylor, *Radical Tories*, 56. See, for example, W.L. Morton, *The Canadian Identity*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961), and W.L. Morton, *The Critical Years: The Union of British North America, 1857-1873*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1964).

⁸² Morton, “Clio in Canada,” 231.

demonstrating that Canada had emerged not in spite of, but because of its geography, it proclaimed its distinctiveness and thereby justified its existence as a nation separate from that of the United States.

As Creighton explained, the northern commercial empire was a distinct North American system, peculiar to Canada.⁸³ Stimulating a westward drive and ultimately an east-west pattern of development, the St. Lawrence provided the basis for a second transcontinental economy and political union in North America. It was notable, for instance, when Creighton argued that the English-speaking merchant class, in the 1780s, were “Canadians” because they were already thinking “in terms of a distinct and continental northern state.”⁸⁴ The commercial empire carried within it the seeds of nationhood.

Critically for Canadian nationalists, this was considered a successful rebuttal to continentalists such as Goldwin Smith who had claimed that the Canada-U.S. border was an unfortunate and artificial political boundary separating what were in effect one people.⁸⁵ In *Canada and the Canadian Question* (1891), Smith argued that Canada’s separate existence had been a historical accident, the result of a civil war between rebellious American colonists and the mother country, and that because they shared ethnicity, language, and a continent, the two nations were destined to reunite.⁸⁶

Moreover, to continentalists the National Policy was proof that the existence of a separate Canadian economy was artificial, since domestic development could only be secured through

⁸³ Creighton, *Empire of the St. Lawrence*, 14.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁸⁵ Smith’s contention prefigured the later fissure, discussed below later in this chapter, between liberal nationalists and Creighton’s conservative nationalists. The former viewed Canada as an American nation, while Creighton et al., of course, rejected that idea.

⁸⁶ Smith, *Canada and the Canadian Question*, 267, 269. In fact, he estimated that for those Canadians living on the border the fusion of the two peoples was already complete.

protection. The majority of Canadians had already realized that they were part of a north-south continental economy and they wanted “commercial intercourse” within it.⁸⁷ According to Smith, the only barrier to Canada’s destiny was an “affection of the Colonists for the mother country” which more often than not had been unrequited.⁸⁸ Again, Laurentianism was thought to have silenced such criticisms and the strengthened the case of Canadian nationalists.

The second manner in which Laurentianism was useful to nationalists was that it interpreted the independent development of Canada as the product of interaction between the people and a distinctive environment. For example, Creighton linked the preponderance of state involvement in corporate enterprises (i.e. canals and railways) to the “imperious demands” of the St. Lawrence.⁸⁹ Despite the fact that the U.S. and Canada shared a remarkably similar political tradition, only in Canada was the state consistently relied upon to bankroll infrastructure projects like the Intercolonial Railway.⁹⁰ The northern empire, then, had accustomed Canadians out of necessity to state intervention. In contrast, Americans typically rejected state intervention.

The influence of the landscape in Creighton’s narrative was unmistakable. Berger wrote that the feeling pervading *Empire* “had much in common with that evoked by the paintings of the Group of Seven.”⁹¹ Notably, “the landscapes of a northern terrain . . . moulded the national character,” providing “the matrix of Canadian institutions, economics, and national hopes.”⁹²

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 276.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁸⁹ Creighton, *Empire of the St. Lawrence*, 16.

⁹⁰ Smith, *Canada and the Canadian Question*, 274. Arguably Canada’s political culture has taken even more American features since Smith was writing, but even then he was echoing others who said that the Canadian experiment with democracy was not markedly different from that in the U.S.

⁹¹ Berger, *Writing of Canadian History*, 214.

⁹² *Ibid.*

Morton, too, emphasised the important role of the North in setting the rhythm of life in Canada.⁹³

In that way, the strength of the climate's influence was consistent with a long tradition of attributing a unique, and superior, Canadian character to the northern location. Berger observed, for instance, that even the first French explorers had remarked "that the future inhabitants of northern America must necessarily be as hardy as their environment."⁹⁴ Nationalists in the Canada First movement (which, ironically, had once counted Goldwin Smith among its members) had, in the 1870s, turned the climate "into the dynamic element of national greatness."⁹⁵ Members of the group, including celebrated poet Charles Mair, extolled the notion that the harsh conditions would produce a hardy, vigorous, and dominant people.

Instead of bemoaning the disparity in environments between the frozen north of Canada and the more hospitable United States, nationalists turned the difference on its head and argued that the warmer climes of the southern U.S. had already begun to sap the energies of Americans, producing a nation of lazy vagrants. Southernness was equated with physical and moral degeneration, while northernness carried with it the institutions of self-government and liberty, which "depended upon self-reliance" and "a rugged independence" that the struggle for existence instilled in inhabitants.⁹⁶

Thus, the Laurentian thesis invoked the influence of nature on the nation and nationalism in a way that recalled German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803). According to Herder, the "first theorist of nationality," nations are a part of the natural order, "aggregations of

⁹³ Morton, *Canadian Identity*, 93.

⁹⁴ Carl Berger, "The True North Strong and Free," in *Nationalism in Canada*, ed. Peter Russell (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 4.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

people” with “shared language, beliefs, feelings, and cultural values.”⁹⁷ In his conception, these features of the nation are a product of the interaction of a people with the particular environment of their homeland and are expressed in “national language, art, and literature.”⁹⁸

Though it was a revelation to Canadians, the approach taken by Innis and then Creighton had obvious parallels with Turner’s thesis about the development of a unique American character. In “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” (1893), Turner had argued that the continued “encounter with the wilderness explained the distinctive features of America: above all, its democracy and its amalgamation of many peoples and sections into a united nation.”⁹⁹ Like the St. Lawrence, the frontier had been treated “as if it were an institution, to be described as a single, organically unfolding process,” and that made his thesis “relatively easy to accept.”¹⁰⁰

According to Turner, “the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward” had a peculiar effect on its people and institutions.¹⁰¹ As they departed the eastern cities for the west, settlers brought with them the traditional political ideas and institutions of government they had been accustomed to in the original colonies; but as they moved westward, they had been compelled to adapt “at each area of this progress” to “the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier” since the western frontier always lay at the outskirts of civilization.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Larry Pratt and Matina Karvellas, “Nature and Nation, Herder, Myth and Cultural Nationalism in English Canada,” *National History: A Canadian Journal of Enquiry and Opinion* 1, no.1 (1997): 60, 61.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁹⁹ John Higham, with Leonard Krieger and Felix Gilbert, *History*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1965), 175.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Turner, *Frontier in American History*, 1.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 2.

What Turner meant was that each time settlers pushed farther west they reached a new edge of civilization where institutions had to begin anew. Simple colonial governments would evolve and eventually result in the more complex organs of representative government, and a primitive industrial society would grow into a manufacturing hub. “American social development,” Turner said, was “continually beginning over again on the frontier.” That “perennial rebirth,” that “expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society” shaped the American character.¹⁰³

If the St. Lawrence system had fostered an acceptance of strong government, the western frontier was “productive of individualism,” and produced “antipathy to control, and particularly to any direct control.” It was why Americans resented non-local government officials, like federal tax collectors, whom they considered agents of oppression. Generations of settlers from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean, representing one hundred years of frontier expansion, had learned to fend for themselves while doing as they pleased. “Born of free land,” the American character was democratic, “strong in selfishness and individualism, intolerant of administrative experience and education,” and it pressed “individual liberty beyond its proper bounds.”¹⁰⁴

The Turner thesis had obvious limitations and it over-generalized, to say nothing of the fact that it was remarkably short (less than forty pages). Yet it was the “theoretical form,” and not the “specific content,” of his “seminal essay,” that was of chief importance.¹⁰⁵ Turner had

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 2, 2-3.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 30, 32.

¹⁰⁵ David Harry Miller and William W. Savage, Jr., introduction to *The Character and Influence of the Indian Trade in Wisconsin: A Study of the Trading Post as an Institution*, by Frederick Jackson Turner, ed. David Harry Miller and William W. Savage, Jr., (Norman, Oklahoma: Oklahoma University Press, 1977), viii.

introduced “what would become the controlling paradigm of American historiography through at least the first half of the twentieth century.”¹⁰⁶ The emphasis he placed on the uniqueness of American development and his “assertion that America was not to be explained as a bundle of European institutions merely transplanted to new soil,” initiated the overturning of the old historiography and laid the foundations for the New Historians.¹⁰⁷

Moreover, like the Laurentian thesis, the Frontier thesis was a concept simple and engaging enough to gain popular interest and understanding. It appealed “to the common desire to root native history in native soil,” and it “sanctioned the tendency” among Americans to shrink from comparing their experiences to those of other peoples.¹⁰⁸ Its influence therefore extended beyond the historical profession because, as historian Richard Hofstadter reflected, it appealed to the “nationalist romanticism” in Turner’s “notion of an aggressive pioneering national spirit nurtured by repeated exposure to primitive conditions became a means to national self-glorification.”¹⁰⁹

In contrast to their older, conservative colleagues, Turner and the group of New Historians that followed him were in a sense more nationalistic than their predecessors. The old historiography, which had treated American institutions in terms of European origins, had long “inveighed against a provincial Americanism.”¹¹⁰ The generation of Turner’s former teacher, Herbert Baxter Adams, had been concerned to demonstrate national unity and the continuity of the character of American institutions because these were synonymous with stability. In that

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, xiii-xiv.

¹⁰⁸ Richard Hofstadter, “Turner and the Frontier Myth,” *The American Scholar* 18, No. 4 (Autumn 1949): 435.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Higham, *History*, 172.

sense the “conservative evolutionists,” as they were called, were nationalist, but the new, progressive historians “cared less about the form of American unity and more about the content of American uniqueness.”¹¹¹

Again, Turner and the New, or rather what came to be called in the next two decades the “Progressive Historians,” developed an entirely new historical paradigm in America.¹¹² Up to that point, the dominant school of historians, based at Harvard, Yale, and other Eastern universities, had been interested in the development of American political institutions.¹¹³ Their approach to historical problems had been narrowly focused “on the purely formal, constitutional structure of institutions,” an approach that foreclosed the possibility of other, more material forces at work.¹¹⁴

In contrast, the Progressive school insisted on “broadening the scope of history,” searching more widely “for the causes and conditions of change.”¹¹⁵ It was not that they were uninterested in political organizations, but rather that they sought to explain changes in institutions by linking the practice of history to the “sister sciences of society” such as economics.¹¹⁶ Thus, abstract portrayals of individuals were replaced by histories that placed the

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 172-73, 173.

¹¹² It is interesting, however, and perhaps a further irony, that the thesis used to differentiate the United States from Europe owed something to an Italian economist. Though Turner’s thought had been impressed by agricultural unrest and the disappearance of cheap land, he had also been influenced by the writings of Achille Loria, who argued that “access to land had dominated the evolution of society” (*Ibid.*, 175). See also Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 92-93.

¹¹³ Hofstadter, “Turner and the Frontier Myth,” 433; see also Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 87.

¹¹⁴ David Harry Miller and William W. Savage, Jr., introduction to *The Character and Influence of the Indian Trade in Wisconsin*, x.

¹¹⁵ Higham, *History*, 172.

¹¹⁶ Miller and Savage, Jr., introduction to *The Character and Influence of the Indian Trade in Wisconsin*, xi.

individual in “an institutional setting i.e. the price system, absentee ownership, large corporations,” and which included the “shaping role of economic forces and the incidence of class conflicts.”¹¹⁷ Widening the scope of their research strengthened the ability of historians to understand and explain the changes that had unfolded and were continuing to unfold before their eyes.

Among the most important historical works to emerge out of this new approach was Beard’s economic interpretation of the U.S. Constitution. Previously, there had been three schools of interpretation that dominated American historical research. The first had explained the great achievements in national life by referencing the “peculiar moral endowments” of Americans “acting under divine guidance.”¹¹⁸ The second was “Teutonic,” ascribing the development of free institutions to the innate racial superiority of Anglo-Saxons.¹¹⁹ The third phase had abandoned attempts to offer “larger” interpretations, preferring instead to merely classify and order historical phenomena for an “impartial” presentation of facts.¹²⁰

“The juristic theory of the origin and nature of the Constitution” had been marked by that same lack of “analysis of determining forces.”¹²¹ What Beard did was to return to the words that James Madison himself had used in *The Federalist*. Notably, Madison made it clear that the “principal task of modern legislation” was to regulate the “various forces and interfering interests” that inevitably emerge in all civilized nations.¹²² Madison was articulating the theory

¹¹⁷ Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968), 185.

¹¹⁸ Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, 1. For an example of that approach, see George Bancroft, *History of the Formation of the Constitution of the United States of America*, (New York: D. Appleton, 1882).

¹¹⁹ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 87-88.

¹²⁰ Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, 3-4.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹²² Quoted in Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, 15.

of economic determinism in politics.

Specifically, Beard argued that the Constitution was the “institutional reflex of a deep and bitter antagonism between creditors and debtors.”¹²³ Creditors, and money capital generally, had suffered under the original Articles of Confederation, which had no provision, for example, for protecting manufactures. Creditors also suffered from a lack of security in investments in western lands, and from the spread of paper money and “other devices for depreciating the currency or delaying the collections of debts.”¹²⁴ In general, there had been a derangement of the monetary system and coinage because there was a lack of uniformity and stability in the standards.¹²⁵

For years, the debtor class, mostly small farmers, had relied upon legislation at the state level to shield them from repaying lenders. The weakness of the Articles of Confederation meant that state legislation typically triumphed. Thus, creditors pushed for a new, stable national government that would prevent laws impairing obligation of contract, as well as the easy emitting of paper currency which depreciated its value. A strong national government that could compel individual states to comply with federal legislation was to the benefit of the creditor class, many of whom had state and continental securities. Under the new constitutional arrangement, the U.S. government could discharge its debt at face value, and those who had loaned it money during and after the Revolutionary War stood to benefit the most.¹²⁶

In retrospect, then, what Innis and Creighton did was to take an historical approach popular in the United States and apply it, with the necessary modifications, to the Canadian

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 32-35.

context. Their emphasis upon the power of the environment owed a clear debt to Turner, while the economic interpretation of Canadian history as a series of class conflicts in Creighton's early publications reminded his "contemporaries of Charles Beard's recent reinterpretation of the American Civil War as the culmination of an irrepressible conflict between different economic systems."¹²⁷

In Canada, Creighton was typical of the "general determination of younger historians to interpret the traditional themes of cultural conflict and responsible government in economic terms," an approach rooted in "the intellectual life of the 1930s."¹²⁸ In that decade, the fashion among Canadian historians and social scientists was to emphasise the "large, impersonal factors" i.e. the economy that had motivated the behaviour of politicians.¹²⁹ It was a reaction against old historiographical models. Biographies had tended to unduly glorify their subjects while focusing more on the state than the individual, while the approach to constitutional history, much as it had once been in the United States, had until the thirties in Canada focused almost exclusively on the forms of things, never penetrating to the "material basis of politics."¹³⁰

Canada was finally catching up to the Americans. South of the border the economic approach specifically, and progressivism generally, had been filtering through academia for decades; Turner was the transitional figure while the WWI-era work of Beard and others, like Carl Becker, cemented the status of the Progressive school as the new establishment.¹³¹ By the

¹²⁷ Berger, *Writing of Canadian History*, 211. As he did with the Constitution, Beard later used the same approach to analyse the U.S. Civil War. See Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*, 2 Vols., (New York: Macmillan, 1927-42). It should also be noted that during his postgraduate work at the University of Chicago from 1918-1920, Innis would have had direct exposure to American historical scholarship.

¹²⁸ Berger, *Writing of Canadian History*, 211, 212.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 219.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹³¹ Higham, *History*, 180. Historian Carl Becker had been a student of Turner's, and had also,

late-twenties, the “old conservative school,” and “constitutional history” along with it, had been eclipsed; they remained “entrenched in many institutions,” but there was no longer any “intellectual vitality” to the tradition.¹³²

However, by the time *Empire* (1937) was published, American historians had already become disenchanted with the Progressive approach, chafing against its determinism.¹³³ There was a sense in the profession that the “neat, intrinsic logic” sketched by Turner, Beard, and others had failed to explain fully the “reality” of events. The common criticisms of Turner, for example, were that he had missed the importance of the city while overstating the influence of the physical environment. More important, however, was the widely-felt frustration that too little autonomy or influence had been given to the role of ideas.¹³⁴

The Burkean Borrowing

It was at this point, in the early forties, that many American historians turned their attention to the importance of the individual and the influence of ideas in shaping political action. Biography and intellectual history became popular by the end of the decade. There were two reasons for the change in focus. For one, it was part of the “unfinished business” of the Progressive school.¹³⁵ Beard’s central purpose had been to introduce realism into the writing of history, and he had done that in writing about the Constitution and the Civil War. Yet, as he and

like Beard, been for a time at Columbia University. As Higham explains, Becker’s Ph.D. dissertation, *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York* (1909), related the rise of a revolutionary movement to lower-class aspirations for a larger share of political and economic power.

¹³² Higham, *History*, 183.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 198.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 198, 203.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 204.

others came to accept, just as “political actions and institutions are not the result of self-contained systems of ideas,” neither are they determined by impersonal forces alone.¹³⁶ Rather, as Hofstadter explained, “there is a dynamic relation between interests and ideas, in which the workings of interests can never be left out.”¹³⁷

The second reason was the growing strength of communism and the start of the Cold War. In that context, economic determinism in historical approaches had become suspect for its similarity to Marxism. Historians felt it was necessary to reassert the capacity of men to choose their own destiny, much like the Founding Fathers had, based on enlightened and principled ideas.¹³⁸ Tied to this was the necessity of demonstrating the superiority of free institutions and the western political tradition.

Beard himself eventually moved in this direction. His writing in the 1940s put greater stress on individuals and ideas, and it turned away from determinism. Against the background of fascism, totalitarianism, and world war, American constitutionalism became more important to him.¹³⁹ He had spent much of his career trying to tear down the mythology of such institutions; now he was concerned with building them back up because the alternative was worse.¹⁴⁰ Beard now argued that historians had a responsibility to attend to the formative role of ideas to support a “social idealism consonant with the needs of the hour.”¹⁴¹

Disturbed by the violent upheaval and political turmoil in Europe, historians in the United States went “on a new quest for stable values,” and eagerly “found strength and sustenance in the

¹³⁶ Hofstadter, *Progressive Historians*, 243.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ Higham, *History*, 205.

¹³⁹ Hofstadter, *Progressive Historians*, 221.

¹⁴⁰ Higham, *History*, 206-07. According to Higham, Beard was “groping for the inner spirit, the unique and enduring essence of American civilization.”

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 314.

past.”¹⁴² Scholars throughout the country were interested in defining and defending the traditional American experience and character.¹⁴³

As the Cold War intensified, many American historians felt it their patriotic duty to defend American liberal democracy. In his presidential address to the American Historical Association in 1949, Conyers Read argued that historians had a social responsibility to present a version of the past that provided assurance to their readers. “If historians,” Read suggested, “in their examination of the past, represent the evolution of civilization as haphazard” and offer “no assurance that mankind’s present position is on the highway” toward progress, then American readers would turn to such systems as communism which did promise assurances about the future.¹⁴⁴ Thus, he said, historians had to carry back into their scrutiny of the past a “faith in the validity of our democratic assumptions.”¹⁴⁵

As discussed in Chapter Two, Edmund Burke’s ideas, especially his morality-based philosophy of politics and his instinctive distrust of dogma, were popular once again with many important historians and public thinkers in the United States. Burke always becomes relevant in times of tumult, war, and revolution, so perhaps it was not surprising that his wisdom about traditional institutions was once again disinterred at this time.¹⁴⁶ In America, Burke was widely popular and was being quoted by academics and politicians alike more frequently than at any

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 206.

¹⁴³ Though it was not until after World War Two that this quest became the fashion, there were actually pre-war appearances of the approach, such as Allan Nevins’s *The Gateway to History* (1938). It had carried with it “a distinctly conservative feeling for tradition and solidarity” (*Ibid.*). See Allan Nevins, *The Gateway to History*, (Boston: DC Heath, 1938).

¹⁴⁴ Conyers Read, “The Social Responsibilities of the Historian,” *American Historical Review* 55, no. 2 (January 1950): 284.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ Ross Hoffman and Dave Levack, Introduction to *Burke’s Politics: Selected Writings and Speeches on Reform, Revolution, and War*, by Edmund Burke, ed. Ross Hoffman and Dave Levack, (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1949), xii.

time since the 1830s.¹⁴⁷

Literary critic and essayist Lionel Trilling as well as the historian and public intellectual Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. expressed concerns about the direction in which modern liberalism was headed. Domestically, it appeared that the growth of individualism had eroded the communitarian ethos, while globally the “levelling frenzy of Communism” meant the loss of private property – the bulwark of modern civilization.¹⁴⁸ Progressive thinkers had long regarded Burke as reactionary for warning against the rationalist hubris that humanity and society could be perfected. In the context of Cold War, Burke’s warnings about the impossibility of designing political systems from scratch was useful in the defence of liberal democracy.¹⁴⁹

A group of conservative scholars and intellectuals were largely responsible for restoring Burke to prominence in the mid-twentieth century. In addition to Russell Kirk, perhaps the foremost American conservative thinker of the twentieth century, the group included political theorist Francis Canavan, Peter J. Stanlis (a leading interpreter of Burke’s political philosophy), historian Ross Hoffman, and political philosopher Leo Strauss.¹⁵⁰ Together, their body of work largely assured the postwar popularity of Burke in North America.

Even more alarmed than liberals at the accelerating impact of modernity on western

¹⁴⁷ Russell Kirk, *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered*, (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1967), 17. Yet the same was not happening elsewhere, notably, in Britain. As Conor Cruise O’Brien explains, most historians of that era in Britain who worked on the late-eighteenth century had been strongly influenced by Sir Lewis Namier, but in the U.S., Namier’s teardown of Burke’s reputation had been less impactful. It was not until roughly 1970 that the Namierite interpretation of Burke gave way to renewed widespread appreciation of the fabled statesman. See Conor Cruise O’Brien, *The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography of Edmund Burke*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), xli-liv.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁵⁰ As the reader will recall from the second chapter, I borrowed from all of them when explaining Burke’s ideas.

society, “modern conservatism, whether moderate or extreme,” found in Burke “powerful opposition to the positivism, nominalism, and materialism of modern liberal thought.”¹⁵¹ Indeed, Kirk et al. appropriated Burke’s teachings and anointed him their intellectual forebear, making his name synonymous with modern conservatism. Kirk contended that “if conservatives know what they defend, Burke is their touchstone.”¹⁵² Political scientist Peter Viereck argued that “the birth of a deliberate international conservatism” was dated by the publication of the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790).¹⁵³ Burke thus attained a mythical role as the father of the movement.¹⁵⁴

Of course, as had always been the case with Burke, he was distorted by his champions for polemical and propagandist purposes. As O’Brien explains, these Americans drew upon Burke for their arguments in the context of the Cold War to articulate U.S. imperial responsibilities as the only major western power left to stand up to the Soviet Union.¹⁵⁵ Though Burke probably would have agreed there were parallels between the Jacobins and communists, it is unlikely he would have approved of U.S. intervention in Vietnam, as these conservatives suggested.¹⁵⁶

Just as Innisian-Creightonian Laurentianism had grown up in the wake of Turner and Beard, so too did the paradigm shift to intellectual history and biography in Canada follow U.S.

¹⁵¹ Carl Cone, *Burke and the Nature of Politics*, Vol. 2, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1964), 511-12.

¹⁵² Kirk, *Genius Reconsidered*, 17.

¹⁵³ Peter Viereck, *Conservatism*, (Princeton, N.J.: Van Nostrand, 1956), 10. It was the same way, Viereck said, that the birth of international Marxism could be dated to the publication of the *Communist Manifesto*. That remained a popular belief for decades. See Tom Truman, “A Scale for Measuring a Tory Streak in Canada and the United States,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 10, no. 3 (September 1977): 597-614.

¹⁵⁴ J.C.D. Clark, Introduction to *Reflections on the Revolution in France: A Critical Edition*, by Edmund Burke, ed. J.C.D. Clark, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 110-11.

¹⁵⁵ O’Brien, *Great Melody*, lxi.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, lxi-lxii.

antecedents. South of the border, discontent with the limitations of the old model had appeared in the late thirties, but in Canada that sentiment was not heard in significant force until after the Second World War. In 1945, less than a decade after the publication of *Empire*, Creighton himself argued that history was not made by inanimate forces but rather by men and women acting according to an endless variety of ideas and emotions.¹⁵⁷ In retrospect, Creighton was speaking for the profession in Canada, because for the next two decades the vital centre of historical scholarship was biography and political histories.¹⁵⁸

Again, the parallels with what had already happened in the U.S. were apparent. Some Canadian historians had been frustrated, too, by the lack of attention to ideas and individuals in the thirties, but in general the popularity of Innis and Creighton meant that historians had to work within their models of development to be treated seriously. It was really not until Creighton (much as it had been with Beard) had sought a wider scope for himself that the discipline turned

¹⁵⁷ Berger, *Writing of Canadian History*, 220.

¹⁵⁸ By the end of the 1960s, critical attention among Canadian historians turned away from the politicians and other powerful individuals to the everyday people who were the subjects of state power. This new social history incorporated more complex economic and sociological analyses of systems of power. For example, working-class historian Bryan Palmer recast the celebrated paternalism of timber baron Dexter Calvin (1798-1884) as the deliberate cultivation of “a notion that authority was constituted in the hands of people who were born to rule or who had earned the right to rule.” See Bryan Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1992), 43. Paternalism was not, as had so often been thought, a beneficent concern for the welfare of the masses, but rather was about reproducing the social relations on which the capitalist system depended. As Palmer explained, paternalism, which fostered appreciation for men like Calvin among his labourers, in fact undermined their collectivity and thus ability to act in concert for better wages and work conditions. Paternalism also extended control over private life. While Calvin provided work, food, lodging, and healthcare, his labourers were forced to sacrifice unions and alcohol, among other things which Calvin considered moral frailties. For more examples of similar paternalist practices in Canada, see Paul Craven and Tom Traves, “Dimensions of Paternalism: Discipline and Culture in Canadian Railway Operations in the 1850s,” in *On the Job: Confronting the Labour Process in Canada*, ed. Craig Heron and Robert Storey, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1986).

in the direction he prescribed. Moreover, as in America, the spread of illiberalism internationally prompted renewed interest in the interplay between ideas, motives, and individual actions in politics. As Berger observed, the challenges of fascism and communism to western liberal democracy likely “contributed to a renewed concern with the single person in history.”¹⁵⁹

When seen in this context, then, the Burkean claim appears to have been yet another case of Canadians appropriating an historiographical trend from the United States. As outlined in Chapter One, the conservative nationalist school of historians had distorted or simplified Burkean thought in order to suit its imperatives. Burke was their touchstone as they invoked his name and the considerable weight it carried in order to revivify Canada’s British identity.

Though a brief Burke aside or two had appeared in Creighton’s work on Macdonald as early as the late-1940s, the majority of the first generation of Burkean claims in Canada were advanced between the mid-fifties and the late-sixties, peaking roughly a decade after U.S. scholars had reinvigorated scholarly interest in Burke’s ideas. Around the time Morton would have been writing *The Canadian Identity* (1961), in which he would make the most explicit Canadian claim to the Burkean inheritance, he was certainly attuned to the work of his U.S. counterparts. His address to Western Canadian University Conservatives in 1959, for example, “reiterated those conservative tenets that the American writers Clinton Rossiter and Russell Kirk had recently disinterred and rehabilitated.”¹⁶⁰

The aping of U.S. trends in Canadian academia is not surprising when we consider that since the Loyalists, many of the English-speaking inhabitants of what became Canada had imbibed the ideas and beliefs that usually drifted northward from the continent’s cultural

¹⁵⁹ Berger, *Writing of Canadian History*, 220.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 252. Recall from Chapter Two that Russell Kirk, especially, was one of the most vocal and influential American conservatives who championed Burke in the postwar period.

metropole. While Canadians did not always take up the ideas of their American neighbours, or did so slowly, very often the latter's discourses became popular north of the border.

It is for this reason that historian Allan Smith argued that, for all its protestations to the contrary, Canada is and has been an "American" nation.¹⁶¹ As Smith pointed out, in the nineteenth century Canadians could not escape the consequences (if they had wanted to) of the constant inundation of U.S. publications into the northern market. Early in the century William Lyon Mackenzie attested to the extensive circulation of U.S. journals, while at "Confederation D'Arcy McGee drew attention to the manner in which Boston functioned as the cultural metropolis for Montreal."¹⁶²

These publications brought with them "that vision of life's meaning which reposed at the centre of American culture," and had been in no small part responsible for many Canadians reconceptualizing the mission of their nation in U.S. terms.¹⁶³ The original mission, articulated first by Loyalists and then echoed by immigrants from Britain, had been framed as a duty to uphold British culture and civilization in the New World against the destructive new doctrines emanating from the neighbouring republic. Even by the 1830s, however, some in Canada had enthusiastically taken up the U.S. idea that as part of the New World, Canadians ought to see themselves as distinct as possible from their British and European antecedent. Mackenzie, for example, argued that Canada should "identify itself with the struggle for liberty" then being waged in America.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ Allan Smith, *Canada – An American Nation?*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994).

¹⁶² Allan Smith, "American Culture and the Concept of Mission in Nineteenth-Century English Canada," chap. 2 in *Canada – An American Nation?*, 31.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

In postwar Canada, the Massey Commission was another example of Canadians importing and repurposing an American conceit to suit their own nationalist imperatives. Published in 1951, the final report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters, and Sciences (the Massey Commission's official name) had concluded that Canadian culture, in contrast to U.S. content, was "high culture".¹⁶⁵ The former was worthy of preservation at government expense because it was a public good, stimulating critical faculties and thereby creating the good citizens needed in representative liberal democracies.¹⁶⁶ Mass culture, however, played to base desires and often went hand-in-hand with propaganda, as Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union had demonstrated. It could all too easily lead to totalitarianism.¹⁶⁷

Yet America's cultural elites had voiced similar concerns about the deleterious effects of lowbrow television and radio programming, the tabloid press, and other popular media. Kuffert explained that cultural critics in Canada "paid close attention to the work of social scientists such as David Riesman, whose dispatches from an alienated United States provided a powerful framework" for Canadians.¹⁶⁸

Ironically, for all their concern that the average Canadian consumed too much of the American popular culture, Canada's elites were arguably influenced themselves just as much by

¹⁶⁵ Paul Litt, *The Muses, the Masses, and the Massey Commission*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 95, 97.

¹⁶⁶ L.B. Kuffert, "Cultural Policy, Cultural Pessimism," chap. 4 in *A Great Duty: Canadian Responses to Modern Life and Mass Culture, 1939-1967*, (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 173.

¹⁶⁷ The Commission had been instigated by, and then became symbolic for, the concern of cultural elites that the American, debased mass culture was too popular already with Canadians and, if domestic cultural producers were not strengthened, the Americanization underway would lead to the disappearance of a distinctive national identity and with it the justification for Canada's existence as an independent nation. See Jeffrey D. Brison, *Rockefeller, Carnegie, & Canada: American Philanthropy and the Arts & Letters in Canada*, (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 6.

¹⁶⁸ Kuffert, "Cultural Policy, Cultural Pessimism," 172.

U.S. high culture.¹⁶⁹ As historian Jeffrey Brison has explained, the Rockefeller and Carnegie philanthropic trusts supported many of the Canadian intelligentsia in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s and “had a formative influence on the ideas of many of the individuals, institutions, and associations who briefed the Massey Commission” as well as on the commissioners themselves.¹⁷⁰ There was a general practice, then, of Canadians defining themselves in terms of recent U.S. trends.

The Burkean claim fits in with this tradition. Using the theoretical lens provided by scholarship on nations and nationalism, it is clear that the Burkean claim is an invented tradition that did the type of discursive work necessary to sustain a nation. His name had considerable prestige (though again, the irony is that his prestige had in the Burkanadian period recently been restored by U.S. historians), and was a symbol packed with meaning, a ready stand-in for the entire British political tradition.

In the words of theorist Benedict Anderson, the nation is “an imagined political community” sustained by a collectively shared belief in a national identity.¹⁷¹ That identity must continually be communicated to the citizenry through signs and symbols such as flags, crests, military uniforms, etc., that make it possible to overlook unequal political and socio-economic arrangements as well as, increasingly, racial, religious, and linguistic diversity, and thus to

¹⁶⁹ Historian and political scientist Stephen Azzi has also documented how ideas in the post-war period moved freely across the Canada-U.S. border. Azzi highlighted, for example, how Canadian nationalists frequently invoked the ideas of American liberals and radicals in critiquing the United States and positioning Canada favourably by comparison. See Stephen Azzi, “The Nationalist Moment in English Canada,” in *Debating Dissent: Canada and the Sixties*, ed. Lara Campbell, Dominique Clément, and Gregory S. Kealey, 213-228, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

¹⁷⁰ Brison, *Rockefeller, Carnegie, & Canada*, 7.

¹⁷¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. ed., (London: Verso, 2006), 6.

maintain the conceit of “a deep, horizontal comradeship.”¹⁷²

As historian Eric Hobsbawm noted, another critical component of this process of communication is the invention of traditions such as public holidays, ceremonies, festivals, sporting contests and the like. According to him, nation states turned to these inventions with “particular assiduity” in the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries as the older methods of “establishing bonds of loyalty” became impracticable during a time of rapid social transformation.¹⁷³

In France, the creation of primary education had been a major innovation, providing for the development of “an alternative ‘civic religion,’” a “secular equivalent to the church” that disseminated a worldview authorized by the state.¹⁷⁴ A second advance in the invention of tradition was the public ceremony. Beginning in 1880, Bastille Day, for example, was an annual celebration with fireworks, dancing, and other amusements that welcomed all French citizens to take part. It transformed the violent heritage of the Revolution “into a combined expression of state pomp and power and the citizens’ pleasure.”¹⁷⁵ A third innovation was “the mass production of public monuments” to commemorate the nation’s heroes.¹⁷⁶

The development of a British identity for English Canadians exhibited many parallels. For roughly one hundred years between Confederation and the mid-twentieth century, the education system imbued generations of schoolchildren with a pride in Britain and its empire,

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁷³ Eric Hobsbawm, “Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870-1914,” chap. 7 in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 263.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 269, 271.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 271.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

and “taught that Canadian institutions derived all their value from British precedent.”¹⁷⁷ The national identity was signified by the Union Jack, which flew at all schools, and the portrait of the reigning monarch, prominently displayed in public fora. Schools were named for members of the Royal Family. Children daily pledged allegiance to the monarch and sang “Rule Britannia” and other songs of empire.¹⁷⁸

As for public ceremonies, Empire Day was a textbook example of orchestrating “an outpouring of public spiritedness” to promote a patriotic imperialism. It began with the suggestion, in 1897, to Ontario’s minister of education that a day each year be set aside “for students to indulge in organized expressions of loyalty to Queen and country.”¹⁷⁹ First celebrated in 1899 in Ontario, it soon was adopted throughout the country, and even became “the Canadian equivalent of the Fourth of July.”¹⁸⁰ There was also Victoria Day, a wholly-Canadian invention to honour the Queen’s birthday on the twenty-fourth of May.¹⁸¹

Starting in 1884, the arrival of the Loyalists in Ontario was publicly commemorated each year on July 3. In Toronto that first year, “Loyalist Day” was marked by “stirring orations on the significance of the loyalist legacy” as well as “injunctions to remain faithful to their principles,” while patriotic anthems were sung and nationalist poetry was recited.¹⁸² Not coincidentally, that

¹⁷⁷ Daniel Francis, *National Dreams: Myth, Memory, and Canadian History*, (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1997), 53.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 52. For more on the reification of British identity in Canada, especially in schools, see José E. Igartua, “Values, Memories, Symbols, Myths, and Traditions,” chap. 3 in *The Other Quiet Revolution: National Identities in English Canada, 1945-71*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006).

¹⁷⁹ Francis, *National Dreams*, 64.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 65. For more on Empire Day, see Robert M. Stamp, ““Empire Day in the Schools of Ontario: the Training of Young Imperialists,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 8, no. 3 (August 1973): 32-42.

¹⁸¹ Francis, *National Dreams*, 65. According to Francis, it has never been celebrated by any other nation.

¹⁸² Berger, *Sense of Power*, 78.

summer also witnessed the creation of the Imperial Federation League. Both developments were part of a tradition of loyalty that “expressed an indigenous British-Canadian national feeling” and which had been awakened by “the nationalistic determination to recover the Canadian heritage and the conservative desire to preserve the guiding principles” of the past.¹⁸³

Finally, and this is where the Burkean claim fits in, the national identity is communicated through the telling of a history that informs the collective in the present and instills in it a resolve to face the future. It is the work of nationalist historians, who “are no mere scholars but rather ‘myth-making’ intellectuals who combine a ‘romantic’ search for meaning with a scientific zeal to establish this on authoritative foundations.”¹⁸⁴ What’s more, their “histories typically form a set of repetitive ‘mythic’ patterns, containing a migration story, a founding myth, a golden age of cultural splendour, a period of inner decay and a promise of regeneration.”¹⁸⁵ The appearance of Burke in the work of conservative nationalists coincided with their dismay at what they viewed as decades of decay, and their hopes that it might be reversed.

In English Canada, the founding myth and migration story was that of the United Empire Loyalists, the group of American colonists who had remained loyal to King George III during the American Revolution, and for that had been banished from the new Republic. They had migrated to what are now the provinces of Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia to build new lives.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.* The Imperial Federation League was an organization with chapters in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (among other British dependencies), formed with the expressed purpose of forming closer ties among the Anglo-Saxon nations in the Empire, possibly leading to a federation that would be similar in form and function to the Canadian Confederation. See also Francis, *National Dreams*, 62-63, and George R. Parkin, *Imperial Federation: the Problem of National Unity*, (London: Macmillan, 1892).

¹⁸⁴ John Hutchinson, “Cultural Nationalism and Moral Regeneration,” in *Nationalism*, ed. by John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 123.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

The Loyalist tradition and founding myth has been well documented.¹⁸⁶ As Berger noted, it began, like all myths about national origins, “with the assertion that the founders of British Canada were God’s chosen people.”¹⁸⁷ They were the best and the brightest of American society, a “superior, cultured, and elevated class of men” that exceeded the common people of the new United States in piety and principle.¹⁸⁸ Moreover, it was said that they believed the British system of government, its religion, and generally its way of life had been blessed by God as the providential order, and for that reason they had determined it was their mission to preserve these things on the continent.¹⁸⁹

Thus, Canada’s founders had a commitment to principles and moral values based in the spirit of the British Constitution. These included a deep respect for history, distrust of materialism, and a social order buttressed by religion and founded on the principle that the interests of the community take precedence over individual selfishness.¹⁹⁰ In contrast to the lawless, materialistic republicanism on display south of the border, the Loyalists would build a stable, orderly, and peaceful government that encouraged morality and that “cherished true liberty, personal independence, and a decent respectability.”¹⁹¹

Again, another feature of such myths is the element of sacrifice and suffering the “chosen” group must endure. The Loyalist lore was no different. As Berger explained, tales of suffering “were lovingly culled and retold” by propagators of the myth, “usually with much emotion and embellishment” to underscore the sacrifices that had been made of property, rank,

¹⁸⁶ See, for example, Norman James Knowles, *Inventing the Loyalists: the Ontario Loyalist Tradition and the Creation of Usable Pasts*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

¹⁸⁷ Berger, *Sense of Power*, 99.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ Wise, *God’s Peculiar Peoples*, 38.

¹⁹⁰ Berger, *Sense of Power*, 103.

¹⁹¹ Wise, *God’s Peculiar Peoples*, 182.

and comfort.¹⁹² In the words of Methodist minister and theologian Nathanael Burwash, the emigres had come to Canada “to face discomfort and poverty and suffering and want for the sake of their principles.”¹⁹³

Some variation of this story had been circulating in British North America since the first Loyalists arrived, operating on the level of myth which is, historian Peter Russell explains, “above all an expression of faith, a call for action, a plea for collective solidarity which depends for validity not on the truth or logic of its contention but on its ability to inspire its adherents with a belief in its historical destiny.”¹⁹⁴ Such inspiration had been necessary in the first decades, especially during the War of 1812 when it appeared as if republicanism might triumph after all. After surviving that war with the United States, British North Americans had a way to strengthen that myth – by triumphing against a superior foe, they told themselves that their survival was a sign that Providence was on their side, that it had preordained their survival in order that they could fulfil a duty to preserve a superior way of life.¹⁹⁵

While this national myth ebbed and flowed for the next few decades, it was stoked again in the 1850s “out of a conscious British-Canadian patriotism as well as from simple nostalgia and a didactic desire to inculcate conservative principles.”¹⁹⁶ It retained an emotional force throughout the 1860s amid growing fears that a United States engaged in the Civil War would, upon its completion, set its sights on finally conquering Canada, and then into the 1870s as

¹⁹² Berger, *Sense of Power*, 101.

¹⁹³ Nathanael Burwash, “The Moral Character of the U.E. Loyalists,” *The United Empire Loyalist Association of Ontario, Annual Transactions For the years ending March, 1901, and March 1902*, (Toronto: 1903), 59.

¹⁹⁴ Peter Russell, Preface to *Nationalism in Canada*, by the University League for Social Reform, ed. by Peter Russell, (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1966), viii.

¹⁹⁵ Wise, *God’s Peculiar Peoples*, 161-63.

¹⁹⁶ Berger, *Sense of Power*, 93.

Canada First and other nationalists sought to equate the British identity and imperial feeling with Canadian nationalism.¹⁹⁷

The efforts of William Canniff were typical. Born in Upper Canada in 1830, near Hastings (a Loyalist landing ground), Canniff was a medical doctor as well as a leading amateur historian and an associate of Canada First.¹⁹⁸ He was ardently nationalistic in his histories of Canada, *Canadian Nationality: Its Growth and Development* (1875), and *History of the Settlement of Upper Canada* (1869).¹⁹⁹ These books celebrated the Loyalists for preserving in Canada a reverence for honesty, obedience, and, most importantly, love of the British Constitution which he praised as the guarantor of a guided and controlled liberty.²⁰⁰ In Canniff's retelling, the Loyalists, like their Tory counterparts in Britain, had rejected Enlightenment principles that, among other things, elevated the rights of the individual over the good of the community and which had produced revolutions in America and France.

Anti-Americanism, predictably, was prevalent in such glorifications of the British past. Canniff offered no excuses for his anti-U.S. sentiments, acknowledging that "fault may be found because of repeated and earnest protests against the attitude assumed by the United States, the comments made in respect to their history, and the contrast drawn upon the subject of LIBERTY and FREEDOM."²⁰¹ As with all venerations of the British inheritance, Canniff's books contrasted Canada favourably with the slave-owning country to the south that had been founded

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

¹⁹⁹ See William Canniff, *Canadian Nationality: Its Growth and Development*, (Toronto: Hart and Rawlinson, 1875), and William Canniff, *History of the Settlement of Upper Canada*, (Toronto: Dudley and Burns, 1869).

²⁰⁰ Canniff, *Canadian Nationality*, 100-02; see also Berger, *The Sense of Power*, 79-80.

²⁰¹ Canniff, Preface to *History of the Settlement of Upper Canada*, vi-vii.

upon violent revolution.²⁰²

In the estimation of Creighton et al., the “golden age” of cultural splendour had crested in the period from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century – the height of Anglo-Imperialism in Canada.²⁰³ These were the years when Empire Day celebrations were new and participation in them at its most enthusiastic, and when it had been most common to regard a Canadian as “simply another word for a Briton who happened to be living abroad.”²⁰⁴ Not coincidentally, that had also been the period in which leading Burkanadians Creighton and Morton were raised, and into which Grant (born 1918), Graham (1919), and the others had been born.

Born in 1902 in Toronto – the heart of English-Protestant Canada and “the most imperial city in the country” – Creighton was no different from the other children his age in that he was taught to revere the Empire and equate British with best.²⁰⁵ The family library, for example, was stocked with Charles Dickens, Lord Tennyson, Anthony Trollope, and the like. After completing his undergraduate studies at the University of Toronto’s Victoria College in the 1920s, he won a scholarship to Balliol College at Oxford, putting him at the heart of imperialist feeling and thought.²⁰⁶

Raised in Manitoba amid a more diverse community that had also included French-Catholics, Métis, and Eastern Europeans, Morton, born in 1908, nevertheless had an upbringing

²⁰² Berger, *Sense of Power*, 80. Berger relates a speech of Canniff’s that touched on all of these themes as well.

²⁰³ Francis, *National Dreams*, 62. Francis said the period was “the high-water mark of imperial feeling.”

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 63-64.

²⁰⁵ Donald Wright, *Donald Creighton: A Life in History*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 39.

²⁰⁶ Taylor, *Radical Tories*, 27.

with similarly strong imperial influences. His childhood home had been filled with dishes, tea caddies, coats and hats all made in Britain, while the portrait of King George V hung in the schoolhouse, and the calendars and school textbooks had imperial iconography.²⁰⁷

Looking backward from the fifties and sixties, it appeared to Creighton et al. that the start of the long period of political and cultural decay in Canada could be dated to the triumph of Mackenzie King's Liberals over prime minister Arthur Meighen's Conservatives in 1921. With King as leader, the Liberal Party had governed the country for most of the twenties, and then uninterruptedly under King (1935 – 1948), and Louis St. Laurent (1948 – 1957). While there was a brief respite in the Diefenbaker years, Lester Pearson's government (1963-1968) finished the work King had started.

Critically for conservative nationalists, the period had been marked by the decline of Britain and Empire; the prestige of identification or association with the mother country had lost its hold on the national imagination. The United States had assumed its place as English-Canada's political, economic, and cultural metropole, a consequence not only of the continentalist policies of the Liberal Party, but also a liberal nationalist hegemony in academia, especially among historians. They had redefined the nation in American terms, denigrating everything from monarchy to the Union Jack, in short, anything that pointed to Canada's colonial past.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁰⁸ According to his most recent biographer, while "Creighton acknowledged Britain's weakness in world affairs" and its "growing indifference to the Commonwealth," to him the real culprits were Liberal Party prime ministers King, St. Laurent, and Pearson, and their accomplices in the intellectual elite, who he "tenaciously blamed" for unfastening Canada from Britain and tying its fate to the U.S. (Wright, *Donald Creighton*, 303). As the historian Kenneth McNaught detailed in his autobiography, conservative nationalists, Creighton especially, harboured a bitter antipathy to prominent liberal intellectuals such as Frank Underhill and A.R.M. Lower, a feeling which was reciprocated. As a student and then a colleague of both Creighton and Underhill, McNaught

The Second World War made closer cooperation with the United States a necessity; there had been no real objections to that from Anglophilic conservatives. After the war, however, Creighton et al. were increasingly “apprehensive about the curtailment of Canada’s freedom of action in foreign policy” and American infringements on its territorial sovereignty.²⁰⁹ It was alarming that there had been no question, for example, of Canadian involvement in the Korean War, or that the U.S. would build and operate military bases throughout the country. This led most to question whether the nation controlled its own destiny.

Businessman Walter Gordon was one of the first to raise alarms about the increasing influence of the United States on Canada in the 1950s and 1960s.²¹⁰ The report of the Royal Commission on Canada’s Economic Prospects, which Gordon chaired, expressed reservations about the increase of American direct investment in the first decade after the war. By the early 1960s Gordon had become increasingly worried. He argued that “Canada could not remain a separate country if it did not take steps to halt the integration of the Canadian and American economies,” and as minister of finance in Lester Pearson’s Liberal government Gordon consistently proposed policies designed to limit American control of the economy.²¹¹ Yet most in the Liberal Party and, indeed, most Canadians, were content with increased prosperity and living

often had to carefully navigate the animosity between the two scholars. See Kenneth McNaught, *Conscience and History: A Memoir*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 38, 99, 145. According to McNaught, Creighton had a “personal vendetta” against Underhill and the “National Liberal Scribes” who had devoted themselves to the Liberal interpretation of Canadian history (*Ibid.*, 99).

²⁰⁹ Berger, *Writing of Canadian History*, 226.

²¹⁰ Stephen Azzi, *Walter Gordon and the Rise of Canadian Nationalism*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1999), 34.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 73. He had similar concerns about the integration of Canadian and American defence policy, believing Canada should have greater independence in that arena despite the era of Cold War paranoia that convinced many Canadians to accept the violation of territorial sovereignty for the sake of protection from the Soviet Union.

standards that had never been higher, and they did not share Gordon's sense of alarm.²¹²

Increasing political, cultural, and economic dependency, then, framed the rise of the Burkean claim. Canada's dominant classes of capitalists, liberal individualists, and all those enthralled with the American way of life were to blame for the disappearance of the country's distinctive values and beliefs.

In the Burkanadians' view, Canadian society had been marked by a respect for the continuities of history. It had been embedded in institutions such as the monarchy and demonstrated by a slow, careful evolution toward political independence that conserved the lessons of the past. Yet, as Grant argued, there could be no "custodians of something that is not subject to change" in the modern age since technological progress entailed unending disruption to "all institutions and standards."²¹³ Old ideas, traditions and customs stood in the way of "the conquest of human and nonhuman nature."²¹⁴

Moreover, modern liberalism conceived of freedom in unlimited terms; the mantra, as Grant put it, was that "men shall be able to do what they want, when they want," that "there must be no conceptions of good that put limitations on human action."²¹⁵ Yet Canada had been founded on a "desire to build . . . a society with a greater sense of order and restraint than freedom-loving republicanism would allow."²¹⁶

²¹² It was not until the later 1960s when Canadians finally began to take seriously the importance of reducing the American influence. In part, the reckoning was motivated by a growing awareness that the U.S., beset by racial violence and embroiled in a vicious war in Vietnam, was perhaps not as benign as once thought. It was also motivated by those like Gordon who spoke and wrote about American economic power. An important contribution to this end was made by economist Kari Levitt. See Kari Levitt, *Silent Surrender: the Multinational Corporation in Canada*, (Toronto: Macmillan, 1970).

²¹³ Grant, *Lament for a Nation*, 66, 65.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 68-69.

To Canadians, social order was a greater good than absolute freedom. As Morton explained, “civil liberties could be preserved only if certain restraints were imposed” upon democracy because otherwise unrestrained, the “simple majority principle” would trample the rights of minorities each time.²¹⁷ Grant discussed how the ethic was nurtured in the historical “use of public control in the political and economic spheres.”²¹⁸ The nation’s conservative character, he said, including its ethic of self-denial and sense of propriety, acted as a check on the growth of corporatist capitalism.²¹⁹ That, too, had faded.

Liberal modernity further entailed ideological conformity. The United States had been founded on ideas; membership was not determined by racial, ethnic, or linguistic identity (in theory, at least), but rather by subscription to certain conceptions of freedom, individualism, and government. Similarly, the age of progress demanded buy-in to faith in human perfectibility, constant technological change, and a triumphant capitalism. Modern liberalism was, therefore, a homogenizing force that would end in the loss of cultural particularity.

Conversely, Canada had been a “community of allegiance,” where the “focus of political loyalty lay with the monarchy, not with the state as the expression of the general will.”²²⁰ Whereas one had to swear fealty to the American way of life in the United States, Canadians had only to swear allegiance to a monarch, enjoying a genuine freedom and pluralism that was unimaginable south of the border.

Perhaps there was little that the conservative nationalist school could have done about these political and economic changes, but they could dispute the worrisome “Liberal

²¹⁷ Berger, *Writing of Canadian History*, 253.

²¹⁸ Grant, *Lament for a Nation*, 69.

²¹⁹ Though Burke was not mentioned by either in these contexts, the idea that self-restraint was necessary to freedom was an argument Burke had made, as I show in the next chapter.

²²⁰ Berger, *Writing of Canadian History*, 252, 253.

interpretation” (what Creighton called the “authorized version”) of Canadian history that emphasised the “growth of freedom from Britain through responsible government and the attainment of Dominion status” and that “expressed a dislike of Britain and a respectful admiration of the United States.”²²¹ That version had been the joint effort of liberal nationalists who, according to Morton, loved Canada even as they hated it for its colonial origins which they clearly wished to deny.²²² The group included the powerful journalist John Dafoe, the political scientist and civil servant O.D. Skelton, and historian Arthur Lower.²²³

As Creighton and the rest pointed out, that version was a misrepresentation. To characterize Canadian history as “an anti-imperialist struggle for responsible government” ignored, for example, that “British military and diplomatic support” had been absolutely necessary to secure the existence of an independent Canada from the ambitions of Manifest Destiny.²²⁴ Lower, Skelton, and others had skipped over the history of American designs on

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 228.

²²² *Ibid.*, 252. See also W.L. Morton, Review of *Canadians in the Making*, *Winnipeg Free Press*, December 13, 1958.

²²³ Berger, *Writing of Canadian History*, 228. See also Donald Creighton, “Sir John A. Macdonald,” in *Our Living Tradition: Seven Canadians*, ed. Claude T. Bissell, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), 48-62. John Dafoe was the long-time editor of the *Manitoba Free Press* (owned by the Siftons, a prominent Liberal family). A Liberal himself, Dafoe was well-connected with Mackenzie King and was a firm believer in pushing for greater Canadian autonomy from the Empire. He also produced a number of books. See, for example, John Wesley Dafoe, *Canada: An American Nation*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935). For more on Dafoe, see Ramsay Cook, *The Politics of John W. Dafoe and the Free Press*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963). Oscar Douglas Skelton, in addition to his academic work, served as Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs and was one of Mackenzie King’s most trusted advisors. Skelton produced a comprehensive biography of prime minister Laurier, as well. See O.D. Skelton, *The Day of Sir Wilfrid Laurier: A Chronicle of Our Own Times*, (Toronto: Glasgow, Brook, 1916). For more on Skelton, see Norman Hillmer, *O.D. Skelton: The Work of the World, 1923-1941*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press and The Champlain Society, Toronto, 2013).

²²⁴ Berger, *Writing of Canadian History*, 229. American newspaper editor John O’Sullivan (1813-1895) is generally credited with coining the term “Manifest Destiny” to convey a sense shared by many Americans that they would inherit possession of the entire North American

annexation, happy to condemn the imperialism of Britain but refusing to recognize it in the United States even as the latter expanded its military presence throughout the globe. What's more, the liberal version represented a destructive frame of mind.²²⁵ The story of English Canada revolved around its struggle for survival on the continent. If it was not substantially different from the United States, then what justified its separate existence and political sovereignty?

The turn to Burke, then, a last-ditch attempt to reinvigorate the old "Tory Touch" thesis, was an expression of cultural nationalism. It fit the textbook description – a "*defensive* response by educated elites" which "crystallizes as a movement at times of social discord between traditionalists and modernists generated by the impact of external models of modernization on the established status order," and "promotes re-integration of the community at a higher level by means of a return to the inspiration of its national past."²²⁶

It made perfect sense to turn to Edmund Burke. He was a British and conservative icon, so his name had gravitas even among many liberals and others disinclined to agree with his politics. He also seemed suddenly more relevant at a time when show trials, state propaganda, and other abuses of authoritarianism brought to mind his warnings about the French Revolution.

It may also have been personal, since these conservatives so clearly appeared to have admired Burke and what he stood for. It was these conservatives, not Canadian political culture, who were "Burkean." Berger explained that Creighton had rejected "self-sufficient and exclusive

continent. See Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation*, (New York: Knopf, 1963). According to Merk, the presence of so much expansionist propaganda among politicians and the press in the 1840s actually overstated the general public's desire for annexing Texas and parts of Mexico; nevertheless, many ordinary Americans believed in an unlimited right to expansion. For a perspective on how this view manifested toward Canada, see Reginald C. Stuart, *United States Expansionism and British North America, 1775-1871*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

²²⁵ Berger, *Writing of Canadian History*, 229.

²²⁶ Hutchinson, "Cultural Nationalism and Moral Regeneration," 128, 129.

rationalism,” believing that “the mysteries of human behaviour and history . . . could not be understood by . . . subjecting the past to clinical dissection, or applying all-embracing ideologies” that oversimplified individuals and their behaviours.²²⁷ Thus, Creighton had been drawn to Macdonald and the other founders because they had “contented themselves with experience and the heritage at hand and did not attempt to plumb the depths of political theory or speculate on the rights of man.”²²⁸ These were the “authentic notes of Burkean conservatism.”²²⁹

Friend and colleague Morton noted this as well, writing that Creighton, in his work, “may perhaps best be seen as Burkean.”²³⁰ Creighton conceived of the historian’s role in Burkean terms. Working from the latter’s premise that society was a partnership between the generations (living, dead, and those yet to come i.e. the unborn), Creighton viewed his role as “a mediator between the generations.”²³¹ The historian was “the spokesman to the living on behalf of the dead.”²³²

Of course, in retrospect we know that their historical and polemical efforts to reinvigorate the British and conservative identity in Canada, and restore a special sense of mission, did not stem the tide. It was profoundly-depressing for each of them as they came to grips with this realization. Morton was sickened by the changes wrought by liberalism and modernity, his disgust notable in remarks as his comment that Canada had been “so irradiated by the American

²²⁷ Berger, *Writing of Canadian History*, 232.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 233.

²³⁰ Morton, “Some Thoughts on Understanding Canadian History,” *Acadiensis* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1971): 101.

²³¹ Berger, *Writing of Canadian History*, 233.

²³² *Ibid.* It should be noted that while both Morton and Berger characterized Creighton as Burkean, the most recent biography of Creighton, by Donald Wright (cited above), makes no mention of Burke at all.

presence that it sickens and threatens to dissolve in cancerous slime.”²³³ Creighton made a number of similar remarks, and near the end of his life had resigned himself to the sad fact that the Canada he loved had been vanquished, and become nothing more than “just a good place to live.”²³⁴

Conclusion – The Contradictions of Canadians’ Nationalist Claims

The Burkean claim is therefore of a piece with the long history of Canadians adapting, indeed sometimes lifting unaltered, American discourses to distinguish Canada from its powerful neighbour. Turner’s frontier thesis and Beard’s economic interpretation of the U.S. Constitution influenced Innis and Creighton, respectively. Renewed attention to ideas and individuals, even Beard’s discomfort with the tradition he had ushered in, was soon paralleled by similar developments in Canadian history. Finally, as Burke’s ideas, indeed even the mention of his name, were used by American conservatives to invoke a powerful tradition of political and moral principles that defended their way of life, so too were they taken up by Canadian conservative nationalists to communicate the superiority of their own nation in relation to the United States.

It is worth asking how the irony of claiming uniqueness using ideas that originated elsewhere appears to have been lost on men like Innis and Creighton, gifted scholars whose exceptional work remains worthy of study to this day. The answer is probably that their own nationalist and polemical imperatives outweighed any scruples about shameless imitation or historical proof. The reverence with which they were regarded by fellow nationalists for

²³³ *Ibid.*, 252. Morton’s remarks were originally made in his Review of H.B. Neatby, *William Lyon Mackenzie King. II. The Lonely Heights, 1924-1932*, *Canadian Historical Review* 14, (December 1964): 317-19.

²³⁴ Donald Creighton, quoted in Taylor, *Radical Tories*, 23.

providing developmental models that justified Canada's existence may have gone to their heads, deluding them into thinking that they were national oracles. Nevertheless, the real significance of the Burkean claim, in the final analysis, is that it leads to the ironic conclusion that Canada's unique pedigree is that it is a nation of second-rate imitators.

CONCLUSION

A deliberate choice was made to title this dissertation ironically. When Macdonald eulogized his friend and colleague Luther Holton in the House of Commons in 1881, he mused on the ephemeral nature of human life with a direct quote from Burke – “what shadows we are, and what shadows we pursue.”¹ It was a rare instance in which Macdonald actually recited Burke. The irony, of course, is that it had nothing to do with political ideas and its rarity underscores the absence of other such occasions when Macdonald knowingly and explicitly cited Burke, his ideas, or his many maxims. It is nevertheless an apt title because this attempt to find solid evidence that Burke was a formative influence on Canadian political culture has often resembled chasing after shadows. Such is the nature of intellectual history. Thus it is too with the nationalist search for a unique identity with which to differentiate Canada from the United States. The notion of a Burkean political culture was part of that search. Its many proponents believed in it despite the absence of any compelling evidence in the historical record.

Recall as well that other historians have registered Burke’s presence in terms similar to a shadow, often invoking it as some variant of a “shade”. For W.L. Morton, Burke was the animating “spirit” residing at the core of Canadian identity. William Gairdner, too, claimed that Burke’s spirit resided in the transcripts of Confederation debates in the colonial legislatures, and Christopher Moore insisted that Burke’s “spectre” accompanied PEI’s Edward Whalen to the Quebec Conference in October 1864. Burke’s ghost hovered over the Fathers of Confederation as they forged their grand plan for a new nation.

This dissertation was inspired by the possibility that the ghost was real, that the

¹ Burke had originally used these words in 1780 in reflection, after a fellow candidate in the election had passed away suddenly.

Burkanadians were on to something in suggesting that Burke's ideas influenced Canadian political culture formatively and profoundly. Given the stature of its leading lights in the historical profession I had anticipated finding proof to corroborate their assertion.

Even so, there were good reasons from the outset to be skeptical of the Burkean claim. It originated at the very historiographical moment when intellectual history, with all of its pretensions and methodological foibles, had great prestige among professional historians. From the late-1940s to the mid-1960s, it was taken for granted that the historian could credibly write of a unified national mind or character that was recoverable from the analysis of texts alone. Political historians, biographers, and others who studied the history of ideas were unencumbered by the need to corroborate their claims from other sources. Their methodology was susceptible to generalization, exaggeration, and omission, especially if their work sustained national mythologies.

Creighton, the leading Macdonald scholar, was an avowed Romantic nationalist whose work evinced a clear bias toward conservatism and British identity. Critics of his Macdonald biography noted how remarkably well its subject anticipated and exemplified the causes Creighton championed in the 1950s. Of course, the Burkean claim was not Creighton's alone. Morton, Roger Graham, and George Grant argued that English-Canada's political and cultural identity resided in the traditional conservatism that was the legacy of its British origins. Canada's special mission in North America was to preserve a way of life, embodied by institutions such as the monarchy, that looked backward as well as forward. Aghast that Canadians, subjected to Americanization and apostate domestic leadership, were rejecting that mindset, they were attempting to turn back the tide.

Morton venerated the institution of monarchy and reminded all Canadians, English and

French, that it had provided continuity of governance and social stability since the *Ancien Régime*. Graham's biography of prime minister Meighen was aimed at restoring not only Meighen, but the British and conservative conception of English Canada that prime minister Mackenzie King and the Liberal Party had discredited. Grant, of course, openly lamented the loss of the old British and conservative Canada. The biases of the Burkanadians were clear.

At its best, their writing evoked powerful emotions. It is difficult to read their elegies for the Canada of their youths and not share their sense of loss. It is easy to dismiss their pleas to save the Red Ensign or the Royal Mail as but the nostalgic yearnings of old men clinging to cherished ethnonationalist symbols for comfort amidst rapid social change. Yet they also elegantly and movingly articulated feelings of loss for a distinct and independent Canada.

We can now look at their invocation of Burke with appropriate incredulity. The political conflicts of the 1960s, which saw previously-disempowered groups arise to challenge the status quo, disrupted the quaint notion of a unified national character. Even if the notion of a national character had remained credible, social historians argued with devastating effect that it was not to be found in a select set of texts produced by a demographic sliver of long-dead privileged white men. To pursue history in that way was to privilege elites and chase abstractions at the expense of coming to grips with the social and economic realities that shaped most Canadians' lives.

Yet despite the chastening of intellectual historians, somehow the Burkean claim enjoyed a second life. A younger generation of scholars picked up where Creighton et al. left off, citing their forebears as authoritative sources for the claim. Today, the notion enjoys an afterlife as middlebrow profundity in popular biography and op eds in national newspapers, a facile apothegm that explains how Canada supposedly evolved into a more cautious, ordered, and less

democratic polity than the United States. Its vitality suggests it is not about to fade away any time soon. To paraphrase a well-worn expression in Canadian politics, Burke's ghost haunts us still.

The idea that Canada is a Burkean nation is very seductive. Whatever criticisms are directed at him today, Burke is still widely-recognized as among the brightest luminaries in the British political tradition, an exceptional thinker whose wisdom has been cited by monarchs, prime ministers and presidents. Some still regard him as the founder of the Anglo-American conservative political tradition. There is considerable prestige that comes by association with Burke.

In order to evaluate the Burkean claim, this dissertation tested for the influence of Burke in a person and event that were critical to the formation of Canadian political culture: Sir John A. Macdonald and the Confederation project. The rationale for this focus was that Macdonald was the chief architect of Confederation and wrote much of the BNA Act himself. His leadership was indispensable to the formation of the modern Canadian state. If Burke was the spiritual godfather of Confederation, then his influence would surely have been evident in the archival record of Macdonald related to that great project. This focus further recommended itself because certain exponents of the Burkean claim singled out Macdonald as a disciple of Burke.

As this dissertation has shown, there is a superficial plausibility to the claim that Macdonald was influenced by Burkean ideas. Court Whig influences were powerful in the Kingston of his youth. Its founders were Loyalist *émigrés* such as Richard Cartwright and Reverend John Stuart who feared the radical republicanism taking hold in the United States, especially its emphasis on greater democracy and unfettered individual freedom. In contrast, Kingston's first leaders championed an ordered liberty safeguarded by a limited monarchy and a

strong executive branch of government controlled by a small coterie of affluent and learned men. These were all Court Whig positions that Burke endorsed.

In 1820, when Macdonald arrived in Kingston as a five-year-old with his family, the Court Whig philosophy had already been deeply entrenched in civic institutions. One of its exemplars was Reverend John Strachan, an influential religious leader and educator who had been given free rein by legislators to fashion the first provincial school system. The presence of the British officer class stationed to oversee the military garrison reinforced a conservative worldview, exemplifying the manners, customs and ideas of old-world elites that Kingston's upper classes were eager to imitate. Most important, the government of Upper Canada was solidly Tory.

Steeped in this environment as a child, Macdonald was apprenticed to George Mackenzie at the age of fifteen. It seems likely that Mackenzie reinforced the Court Whig influences upon his young apprentice. Macdonald lived with Mackenzie while still a very young man, and the lessons he received at that formative stage went beyond legal briefs. In business but especially in politics, Macdonald became the consummate pragmatist, aiming always at compromise and avoiding any digressions into the abstract that diverted energies away from results.

Macdonald knew his eighteenth-century history, so he was aware that Burke had been an important statesman. Macdonald's catholic taste in literature surely exposed him to Burke as a philosopher and cultural critic as well. He was fond of Romantic poetry and often recited Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and Sir Walter Scott. All three poets and authors had been interested in Burke's perspectives and had responded to parts of them in their work. In British North America, most of the published poets were producing work that was highly derivative of those British Romantics, and one of the most widely-read authors of fiction,

Thomas Chandler Haliburton, was a dyed-in-the-wool Tory whose family had imparted to him the importance and genius of Burke. Macdonald would have read it all.

We can conclude, then, that through the political culture in which he grew up and through his reading, Macdonald was aware of Burke and his significance. There is, then, a circumstantial case that Macdonald was influenced by Burke that could provide some basis for claiming that Canadian political culture is Burkean. Beyond that, however, there is little historical evidence to suggest that Macdonald was influenced by Burke in any significant fashion.

As the balance of this dissertation showed, upon a close investigation of Macdonald's archival record it cannot be proven that Burke's ideas had any notable influence upon him and his Confederation project. The investigation began by devising a standard measure of Burke's political ideas by which to analyze all available relevant sources methodically. The test was based on a thorough examination of sources that included Burke's principal writings as well as numerous secondary studies, and categorized his ideas according to the three themes it found to be most prominent in his work. The first theme concerned his position on reform, particularly when he believed it to be desirable and practicable. The second grouped together his ideas about the form and composition of government, including his trust in the balanced Constitution and his anxieties about democracy. The third covered his thinking on the appropriate relationship between the state and its citizens, including the individual rights and protections to which they are entitled.

The application of the Burkean test to Macdonald involved looking for references to Burke or his ideas in Macdonald's papers, including his letters and speeches, and in secondary sources, including his biographies. Ultimately, the results were inconclusive. In part this was owing to the methodological challenges inherent in intellectual history. Only occasionally does

the historian find a historical figure whose intellectual debts are clearly articulated and consistent with their actions. In this research, D'Arcy McGee was a case in point. He identified himself as a Burkean and frequently was explicit about how Burke guided his thinking. In the case of Macdonald, such evidence was notable for its absence.

Instead, the dominant topics in Macdonald's papers were nation-building and administration. The main themes in his speeches were the need to develop resources and grow the economy. Aside from obligatory references to the superiority of British institutions, there was scant political philosophy to be found, let alone specific references to guiding theorists. Macdonald's correspondence focused on the daily minutiae of his cabinet and ministerial responsibilities and on setting out electoral strategy to members of the Conservative Party. One searches it in vain for just one overt invocation of Burke (the "shadow" quote, which came from one of his speeches, notwithstanding). Burke's signature expressions or metaphors were absent, and he was mentioned by name only a handful of times, usually along with other statesmen of his time. Neither the transcripts from the Charlottetown and Quebec City conferences nor the British North America Act contained language that could be construed as singularly Burkean.

This conclusion is at odds with the original purpose of this study, which began as an attempt to substantiate the Burkean claim. As research proceeded, however, doubts accumulated faster than evidence. In marshalling intellectual history methodology for the task at hand, the coherence fallacy emerged as a major consideration. Intellectuals by definition are fond of ideas, and intellectual historians have often been criticized for privileging the agency of ideas in history and being susceptible to coming up with the very type of results they set out to find. They have a weakness for discovering ideas operating systematically as ideologies with causal effect. This project began with such an expectation.

At first there seemed to be some basis for characterizing Macdonald as Burkean. As a young man he sometimes went beyond platitudes in the course of articulating something of his principles and said something that could be characterized as Burkean. For example, when early in his political career he warned against excessive constitutional tinkering he sounded like Burke. Likewise when he defended primogeniture on the basis of its historical merits, voiced his opposition to abstract theorizing in politics, and expressed ambivalence about democracy. Yet while these select statements happen to agree with parts of Burke's work, that does not mean Macdonald was profoundly influenced by Burke. They were discovered by combing through his archive in search of a particular sort of evidence, the type of "cherry-picking" that selects facts that fit with a hypothesis and presents them out of context as proof of it, neglecting to consider that the results may have been overdetermined by the original purpose of the research.

The coherence fallacy emerges again when assessing the consistency of systems of thought from one historical context to another. Macdonald's Canada was far removed from that of the eighteenth-century British politics in which Burke operated. It would be naïve to assume that nothing was lost in translation between these two distinct milieu. Burke's legacy was mutable and contested. It was often appropriated and bastardized for expedient partisan purposes. In the absence of any explicit statement from Macdonald there is no way to know what Burke's intellectual legacy meant to him, and every reason to suspect that it meant very little.

As the above discussion suggests, one conclusion of this study is that intellectual history is beset by issues that drastically limit what it can prove. The intention had been to discover Macdonald making repeated references and explicitly positioning himself, much as McGee had, in the tradition of Burke. That kind of evidence could not be found. Of course, the absence of proof does not in and of itself conclusively demonstrate that Macdonald and, by extension,

Confederation, were *not* Burkean. This raises the problem of immanent ideology, another feature of intellectual history that has attended this investigation throughout. It poses the possibility that Macdonald may have been an unselfconscious Burkean. According to this line of argument, the absence of explicit proof of Burkean thought in Macdonald's historical record is, in a backhanded fashion, proof of its potency: so pervasive was it that it was taken for granted. There was no need to articulate the political common sense of the times.

It is possible that the immanent ideology left unarticulated by Macdonald and his colleagues could be characterized as Burkean. It was an ideology in the Court Whig tradition to which Burke had belonged and had a significant part in shaping, especially after the French Revolution. Again, without an explicit statement from Macdonald this is merely speculation. An immanent ideology argument is by definition not susceptible to historical proof, so it can neither validate nor invalidate the Burkean claim. It is surely no great revelation to conclude that we cannot know everything about the past. Historical scholarship accepts that our knowledge will be partial and contingent. However, it insists that what we do claim to know be based on rigorous research and analysis. A responsible scholar cannot simply make a historical claim and challenge peers to refute it. Under these circumstances the onus was on the Burkanadians to prove their claim, and they made no attempt to do so. The immanent ideology caveat leaves the claim unproven.

Here the coherence fallacy combines with the issue of immanent ideology. An immanent ideology by its very nature generally consists of a commonly accepted set of generalities rather than the system of thought of any one political thinker, and in the case of Burke this is emphatically the case. The invocation of Burke's name has intimations of the Great Man school of historical interpretation, implying that his heroic genius was the wellspring of the British

political tradition. However, as this study noted, Burke's ideas were not particularly original. He was not a systematic philosopher who constructed from first principles an abstract body of coherent thought. He was, rather, a close student of the British political tradition who eloquently articulated some of its key precepts and extolled their virtues. He valued precedent and the wisdom of experience and was particularly adept at drawing on past practice to formulate a principle to be applied to present circumstances.

The legacy of Burke is similarly intertwined with subsequent British political tradition. He elevated the British habit of muddling through into something inspired and principled. Its practitioners were understandably gratified to have their machinations ennobled as something akin to political philosophy. Subsequently features of the tradition that preceded Burke were characterized as Burkean. It simplified a complex historical phenomenon to have one person embody it. As Burke became a symbol of the British political tradition, disentangling his particularity from that tradition became impossible.

This study underlines the weakness of the Burkean claim by weighing its explanatory power against a political economy analysis of Macdonald and Confederation. The simplest and most likely explanation for the British North American union in 1867 is that it was necessary to preserve and extend the economic empire of central Canada. It was thought that, linked together by a new transcontinental railway, a larger, federal union would open up opportunities for investments in infrastructure, and ultimately attract capital, industry, and immigrants to each of the new provinces. The plain, simple language of the BNA Act said it all. Macdonald's papers did not show that he had a Burkean plan for Canada. They did show that economic development was his number one priority. From the beginning of his political career to the end, development was the subject to which he always returned. At Charlottetown and Quebec City, his arguments

in favour of union stressed how it would increase general prosperity.

It is possible to argue that Macdonald's focus on the material fundamentals of nation-building was entirely in keeping with the Court Whig propensity for state intervention in support of economic development. There is evidence that in his plans for Confederation he emulated the Federalists in the United States, themselves admirers of the Court Whigs. Since Burke was closely identified with the Court Whigs, it would follow that Macdonald was in this regard quite Burkean. However, while Burke was Court Whig in his advocacy of a system of government that balanced powers, he was not an ideologue about Court Whig economic policy. Moreover, his prosecution of Warren Hastings placed him closer to the Country Whigs whose civic republicanism was grounded in a fear of tyranny and corruption at the centre. As his biographers note, Burke consistently railed against abuses of power however constituted.

In the absence of convincing historical evidence for the Burkean claim, what then explains its origin? To answer this question, it was necessary to return to the postwar Canadian context in which the claim arose. The Burkanadians were Romantic nationalists eager to do the work of nation-building when writing their histories of Canada. They had an axe to grind with liberals who they felt had clearly distorted the meaning of and devalued the nation's British heritage while remaining blind to all the negative consequences of integration with the United States. Their invocation of Burke arose out of their present-day polemical needs. At no time did they attempt to ground it in the type of historical research and analysis conducted by this study. Applying the theoretical lens provided by scholarship on nations and nationalism leads to the conclusion that the Burkean claim was an invented tradition that did the type of discursive work necessary to define the nation. His name had considerable prestige and was a symbol packed with meaning because fallacious coherence had him personify all the wisdom of the British

political system.

Ironically, the Burkean claim fit into a tradition of Canadian nationalists borrowing American ideas to distinguish Canada from the U.S. The Laurentian thesis, for example, can be seen as a belated Canadian answer to Turner's Frontier thesis, explaining the development of a distinctive people in terms of a unique geography. After American historians turned back to the importance of ideas and revived Burke's reputation in the late-1940s, Creighton et. al followed suit. The discovery of how the Burkean claim fit with this tradition was an unexpected research finding that, upon reflection, should not have been that surprising.

In short, the answer to the research question that initiated this project comes in two parts. The first part concerns what Burkanadians implied in making their claim. In keeping with the abundant Canadian identity theorizing of their times, they were trying to characterize Canada as a British North American nation. They used Burke to assert that Canada had a unique political culture that justified its existence as an independent nation and enjoined resistance against continentalism. Invoking the potent reputation of a great political thinker ennobled both their cause and the Canada supposedly shaped by his wisdom. This study has demonstrated that if the Burkean claim is taken to mean what the Burkanadians wanted it to mean, it is untenable. There is no evidence that Canadian political culture was at a formative stage in its development imbued with the political philosophy of Edmund Burke. On the other hand, if claiming that Canadian political culture is Burkean is to assert simply that Canada had a British political inheritance, that is mere platitude. When all is said and done, that is all there is to it.

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