

Philosophy on the Edge of Empire

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IN “Some Reflections on the Liberal Tradition in Canada,” his 1946 presidential address to the Canadian Historical Association, Frank Underhill declared that Canada had gained considerable political autonomy and economic maturity during the war years. Yet, somehow, Canadians remained philosophically immature. “[T]o the discussion of those deep underlying intellectual, moral and spiritual issues which have made such chaos of the contemporary world we Canadians are making very little contribution.” He returned to this theme nearly 20 years later when he delivered the CBC’s Massey Lectures, published as *The Image of Confederation*. The “lack of a philosophical mind to give guidance to the thinking of ordinary citizens has been a great weakness of our Canadian national experience throughout our history,” he wrote.

Four decades later, would the historian be justified in making such a claim? Not likely. Canadian philosophic thinkers have acquired a significant reputation both at home and abroad since the 1960s. Will Kymlicka, Michael Ignatieff, James Tully, Waller Newell, Tom Darby, Barry Cooper: these thinkers, among others, have gained audiences in places as far flung as India, Australia and eastern Europe. Tully’s thought on constitutionalism and Kymlicka’s ideas on citizenship attract attention as far away as India and Africa. Cooper and Newell publish well-received books in the United States. Darby’s writings on globalization appear in journals and essay collections in eastern Europe and the United States. Ignatieff needs no introduction, of course; before he returned to Canada in hopes of becoming prime minister he had an international reputation for his work on human rights, ethnic warfare and the new age of empire.

However, if there is one thinker who has put paid to Underhill’s lament, it has to be Charles Taylor, professor emeritus of philosophy at McGill University. He’s been described by Craig Calhoun as “among the most influential of late 20th-century philosophers,” and credited with helping to develop “a distinctive Canadian school of political theory” that has gained international attention with its focus on questions of citizenship, constitutional order, justice and multiculturalism. Earlier this year, Taylor reinforced this judgment by winning the 2007 Templeton Prize for “Progress Toward Research or Discoveries About Spiritual Realities.”

He was certainly a worthy choice. Over the course of a long career that has produced more than 300 scholarly

papers and a dozen books, Taylor has offered deeply thought theories for reconciling diverse cultures and even diverse theories of knowledge. He has written on everything from political theory, ethics and cultural criticism to epistemology and linguistic theory. His book on Hegel remains essential reading 30 years after its publication. In more recent works — *Sources of the Self, Multiculturalism and The Politics of Recognition, Modern Social Imaginaries and Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* — Taylor explored the genesis of the concept of selfhood, notions of identity and authenticity and the various ways westerners have “imagined” the meaning and purpose of their civilization.

If there is one thread that winds through Taylor’s thought, and, arguably, binds it together, it is his critique of “scientism.” For Taylor, the “scientific” world-view and its narrowly empirical understanding of human knowledge goes astray when it attempts to interpret humans as “objects” or “things” that can be “known” for what they most essentially are when detached from the social and natural worlds in which they have their lives. Against this epistemology, Taylor has set his own project, one grounded in an idea taken from French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty: “Because we are in the world, we are condemned to meaning.” (As Nicholas H. Smith notes in *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*, “Taylor’s complex project germinates from this simple core idea.”)

A simple notion, perhaps, but as Taylor’s latest work demonstrates, it has had immense consequences for western civilization. *A Secular Age* extends Taylor’s search for the sources of meaning within modernity with a mammoth accounting of the rise of secularism and the retreat of Christianity. Throughout the book Taylor returns repeatedly to one essential question: What does it mean, and how has it happened, that we, as westerners, have

Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007, 874 pages

Janet Ajzenstat, *The Canadian Founding: John Locke and Parliament*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007, 199 pages

Hugh Donald Forbes, *George Grant: A Guide to His Thought*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007, 200 pages

Alexander John Watson, *Marginal Man: The Dark Vision of Harold Innis*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. 545 pages

shifted from being an “enchanted” God-centred civilization to being a “disenchanted” civilization in which belief in a divinely ordered world is no longer a given?

It is a daunting question, obviously, but at 874 pages *A Secular Age* makes a monumental effort to provide an answer. It is not an easy read. That’s not to say the language is burdened with academese or jargon. Taylor is a fine craftsman of language. There is an intimacy to his style. You sense that his lectures would be engrossing. The difficulty lies in the density of his argument and the circumlocutionary approach to his topic. You have to pay close attention, practically taking each paragraph as a morsel that needs to be thoroughly chewed before you swallow and move to the next thought.

Essentially, Taylor examines the displacement of religious faith from the centre of the West’s social, political and cultural configurations and the emergence over the last half-millennium of those “modern social imaginaries” that have filled the vacuum of faithlessness. By ‘modern social imaginaries,’ a phrase that became the title of a book he published in 2004, Taylor means that “historically unprecedented amalgam of new practices and institutional forms (science, technology, industrial production, urbanization); of new ways of living (individualism, secularization, instrumental rationality); and of new forms of malaise (alienation, meaninglessness, a sense of impending social dissolution).” According to Taylor, we now live in an age of “secularity,” which, for most people, refers to the decline in religious beliefs and practices, the retreat of religion from the public arena and, at the political level, the separation of church and state. As he puts it: “The question I want to answer here is this: why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?”

Taylor distinguishes two theories regarding the process of western secularization. One theory sees the increasing acceptance of a scientific epistemology leading to a decline in personal faith, the result of which was the fading of religion as a political force. Darwin’s theory of evolution, for example, made it increasingly untenable to believe in a God-created world that was only a few thousand years old. A second theory flips the relationship to argue that social and institutional changes — economic, political and educational — set in motion during the Reformation and Enlightenment increasingly marginalized religion, which resulted in the waning of personal faith. The church became less influential as people looked to other institutional and social arrangements to satisfy their needs, spiritual and material.

Taylor does not oppose these two theories, but he questions their adequacy. Copernicus, Newton and Darwin tore big holes in the theological accounts of the world, but the popular idea that science defeated religion because it “proved” God’s non-existence does not tell the whole tale. Taylor proposes a third theory of secularity. The real clue to western secularism, he says, is the moral

appeal of science. The emergence of science and its promise to make the world more knowable, and to materially improve the human condition by means of that knowledge, allowed people to look elsewhere besides the church for sources of moral and spiritual meaning. In the age of belief, people assumed their sources of meaningfulness, including their social and political arrangements, were anchored by their faith in God; in a secular age, people believe they have alternatives to God for conducting and making sense of their lives. Over the course of the modern era, a God-saturated moral outlook has given way to a science-based, humanist perspective that “consists of new conditions of belief,” including atheism, or, to use Taylor’s phrase, “exclusive humanism.” In other words, according to Taylor, secularism reflects a spiritual shift, not a rejection of spirituality.

Taylor finds the sources for this shift within Christianity itself. He traces the retreat of Christendom to the high Middle Ages and the Reformation in the 16th century when notions of a more personalized relationship between man and God began to displace rituals rooted in collective worship. The Protestant Reformation, in particular, fostered the idea of inner or spiritual freedom in denying the need for institutional orders to mediate between man and God. The idea of salvation through work rather than through faith further promoted individual autonomy, while the rising importance of everyday life displaced the pre-modern focus on the life beyond this world.

The Enlightenment *philosophes* pushed the Reformation ethos even further down the secular path. They sought to master the human world in the same way the natural sciences were mastering nature. The application of scientific methods of objective observation and inductive calculation would allow man to remake the human world in his own image. Thus, the *philosophes* effectively turned the Protestants’ desire to be free to worship as they wished into subjective worldly freedom.

The last two centuries have taken this notion of freedom, or individual autonomy, to the extreme. Many people, perhaps most, no longer assume a spiritual dimension to the political or social structures — marriage, family, community, etc. — within which they have their lives. The desire for meaningfulness is by and large personal and subjective. Modern westerners now focus on “authenticity” and counter-culture ideals of self-fulfillment. We have become what Taylor calls “buffered selves,” individuals capable of acting morally and rationally without reference to religious faith. Our spiritual lives have been privatized into concerns for creature comfort.

Such arguments should not imply that Taylor is anti-modern. He does not seek a return to medieval Christendom, even if that were possible. He is well aware that “belief in God isn’t quite the same thing in 1500 and 2000.” He acknowledges that great danger attends any revival of religion. As the ideological wars of the 20th century so horribly demonstrated, the longing for transcendence, for meaning “beyond” ordinary life, can lead to

mass murder. Still, Taylor also recognizes that the “desire for eternity” is deeply embedded in the human psyche. Moreover, this spiritual longing has fostered our best mundane forms of transcendence — art, architecture, painting, poetry, politics and science. The “exclusive humanists” too readily ignore the historical reality that Christianity has been an essential source for moral order and political reform in the West, despite all the abuses perpetuated in its name.

With this in mind Taylor attempts to weave his way between the boosters and the knockers of modernity. The boosters include secular humanists that disbelieve any notion of absolute horizons or moral standards for human conduct. The knockers include those who regard the modern project as essentially nihilistic. While Taylor clearly resides in the camp of the faithful, he does not deny that secular humanism also seeks “human flourishing.” Even atheists act out of a belief in the good when they promote human rights.

But then Taylor touches the sore spot of the 21st century West — the spectre of meaninglessness haunts modernity. Despite the success of western societies in terms of economics, politics, science and technology, there is a sense of something missing. Not everybody has “settled into comfortable disbelief.” Taylor recalls Peggy Lee’s old torch song, *Is That All There Is?* in observing the growth in phenomena such as the human potential movement and new age spiritualism as evidence of the “revolt from within unbelief” against the atheistic denial of humans’ innate longing for contact with something of intrinsic meaning *beyond* the satisfactions of material life. The success of secularism depended on scientism’s “disenchantment” of the world. But now there is widespread disenchantment with secular humanism. The narratives of modernity that replaced religion as the West’s dominant “social imaginaries” — faith in rationalism, belief in progress, individual freedom, etc — are now under attack. Religion, says Taylor, has reemerged as a consequence of dissatisfactions with secularism. “As a result of the denial of transcendence, of heroism, of deep feeling, we are left with a view of human life which is empty, cannot inspire commitment, offers nothing really worthwhile, cannot answer the craving for goals we can dedicate ourselves to.”

Taylor’s central theme comes to the fore on this point — human beings require a spiritual dimension, an intimation of the sacred, a sense of the *beyond*, if they are to flourish as more than creatures desperate to avoid violent death and content in their material comforts. “I insist on this point because in a way this whole book is an attempt to study the fate in the modern West of religious faith in a strong sense. This strong sense I define, to repeat, by a double criterion: the belief in transcendent reality, on one hand, and the connected aspiration to a transformation which goes beyond ordinary human flourishing on the other.”

Taylor understands that there can be no return to the all-encompassing religiosity of the past. The re-

Christianization of the modern West is unlikely. Nevertheless, we remain spiritual creatures in our most essential natures. Taylor reminds us that what we take for granted — our age’s lack of faith — is, in fact, an anomaly of history. Our forefathers did not live this way and our grandchildren might not either. Considering the doubts about extreme secularism, and the often desperate responses to those doubts, however misguided and dangerous, we are confronting a new Age of Spirit. In this regard, Taylor’s latest *magnum opus* provides a comprehensive examination of what well be the long-term trend in religious sensibility over the course of the century.

A Secular Age also answers a question that has often been asked of Taylor: Is he a fox or a hedgehog, intellectually speaking? The Greek poet Archilochus said there are two types of thinkers, foxes and hedgehogs. “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.” Foxes regard the world in a fragmentary manner without necessarily attempting to comprehend the varieties of human experience within an overarching vision of the whole. Hedgehog thinkers, on the other hand, dive deep, seeking ideas or principles that can provide a comprehensive account of experience. Plato and Hegel are hedgehogs; Machiavelli and Montaigne are foxes. Obviously, such a dichotomy is simplistic (and, no doubt, open to debate), but after reading Taylor’s latest tome it is clear that he belongs in the camp of the hedgehogs.



I would also place Janet Ajzenstat in that camp, too, albeit for much different reasons. If Taylor harkens to the future, Ajzenstat, a professor emeritus at the University of Waterloo, reminds us of — or, better, re-educates about — our past.

It has long been a commonplace of Canadian political history that our founding fathers were a dull lot, philosophically speaking. Generations of students have been taught that Confederation was a business deal. A bunch of businessmen cum politicians came up with a deal to solve the legislative deadlock of Upper and Lower Canada and thereby further their interests. As recently as the 1970s, in W.L. White’s edited collection, *Canadian Confederation: A Decision-Making Analysis* (1979), historians who studied the decision-making behind Confederation declared “the almost complete absence of any recourse to more than elementary theory in developing a basic constitutional document.” Such views prompted Stephen Brooks, who provided this quotation in *Political Thought in Canada* (1984, p. 10), to comment on the “unreflective quality of the founders’ deliberations, in marked contrast to the fathers of the American republic.”

This is not an isolated view, as Ajzenstat relates in her most recent book, *The Canadian Founding: John Locke and Parliament*. She lists a half-dozen contemporary scholars — including Frank Underhill — who, to one degree or another, believe Confederation was “born in pragmatism,” the

product of a clutch of “pragmatic lawyers” and “railway buccaneers” more interested in profit and power than first principles and national purpose. She then takes some 200 pages to demonstrate that Canada’s founders were as philosophically informed, as theoretically astute, as the founders of the United States. By the end of the book, it is hard not to accept her argument.

Like Taylor, although in a much different vein, Ajzenstat returns to sources in an attempt to find those foundational concepts that might reinvigorate Canadian political life. She seeks to recover those ideas on which Canada’s political institutions were built in an effort to restore the vitality of those institutions.

If there is a particular bugaboo in Ajzenstat’s work – the concern that qualifies her for hedgehog status, as it were – it is the notion promulgated in political science departments over the last four decades that there is an abiding “Tory touch” in Canadian political culture. This tincture of Toryism, it is said, fostered a collectivist impulse in Canada that is absent from the republic to the south and accounts for why we have a socialist party, and why you still find the odd Red Tory tiptoeing around the fringes of the federal Conservative Party. This Tory touch, so the story goes, has given Canada everything from medicare to welfare, and made Canadians more caring and compassionate than Americans.

Ajzenstat has poked plenty of holes in this Tory tale. She was one of the editors of the 1999 book, *Canada’s Founding Debates*, a never-before-collected compendium of the Confederation-era debates in the legislatures of the British North American colonies, that, as the book jacket blurb states, gave Canadians back “their historical birthright.” In a 1995 collection of essays, *Canada’s Origins: Liberal, Tory or Republican*, Ajzenstat and co-editor Peter Smith challenged the consensus that the formative influence on Canadian political culture had been a “combination of liberalism and tory conservatism” – the Tory touch, in other words. They argued that new research showed “little evidence of tory conservatism in Canada’s past or in Canadian political culture today. Toryism is being read out of the ideological temple.” The deepest influence that shaped Canada’s political culture and institutions was “a contest between political radicals who advanced the republican philosophy, and liberal constitutionalists who clung to the tradition of John Locke.” In *The Once and Future Canadian Democracy*, published in 2003, Ajzenstat continued to challenge the categories of liberalism, conservatism and socialism as the formative basis of Canada’s political culture. Borrowing from the arts and philosophy, she argued that the country’s political differences are better explained in terms of the distinction between romanticism and classicism.

The Canadian Founding shares many of the concerns as her previous work, and much the same purpose. In this book, Ajzenstat aims to uproot the myth of the Tory touch and restore the Lockean legacy. She draws on the speeches and papers of the delegates to the pre-

Confederation Charlottetown and Quebec conferences, along with those of various politicians in the colonial assemblies of British North America. These documents “show us political men of the Confederation period drawing on Locke, Burke, and other sources in the history of political philosophy to support, challenge, and illustrate concrete political prescriptions.” (You can’t help but wonder how the current members of the House of Commons would stack up against the founders.)

“It is true they did not speak or write in the manner of political philosophers. They did not write treatises,” Ajzenstat says. “But they were indeed familiar with the philosophical principles underlying classical liberalism ... And they brought this knowledge to bear in the debates on the federation of the colonies and in the creation of a new ‘general government’ for the union.”

Ajzenstat levels her intellectual guns at the “Canadian-identity scholars” – Charles Taylor, Will Kymlicka, Gad Horowitz and George Grant, for example – who think Canadians need a stronger national identity, a heightened sense of “belonging.” She thinks this communitarian ideal is foolish and politically enervating. “Canadians have no shared sense of history [and] there is no consensus about cultural identity.” Nonetheless, Canadians have flagellated themselves for the last forty years – think of those endless constitutional debates from the 1960s to the 1990s – in a fruitless effort to find some singular identity that, according to Ajzenstat, does not exist. They should stop trying, she says.

Again, Ajzenstat looks to the historical record to make her case. The founders, she says, were well aware of questions regarding cultural diversity and national identity. But their purposes – and the political philosophy that informed those purposes – were aimed at securing an institutional order that could provide conditions for law and order. Canada’s founders “rejected the idea of a national cultural identity” not only because there was no consensus between the English-speaking and French-speaking colonies on what that identity should be, but also because “a substantive identity is inevitably exclusive, favouring the founding peoples over latecomers, the majority over minorities.” Instead, they established an institution, Parliament, to promote the essentials of civilized order – the rule of law, equal rights, justice, and civil peace.

This idea, Ajzenstat reminds us, is essentially Lockean. The English political theorist conceived of Parliament as much more than a decision-making institution. It was also intended to be a deliberative arena, a political space, in which the passion, willfulness and aggressiveness inherent to human nature could be tamed and redirected for the benefit of all. “The Fathers and legislators regarded Parliament as more than an institution necessary to union, more than a mechanical device, as it were, to bring the provinces together. They thought that Parliament would define the nation. The national Legislature would give the people of British North

America, who had formerly identified themselves as citizens or subjects of the individual provinces, a sense of belonging to both province and the larger country; that is, it would give them what we now call an ‘identity.’” Hence, Ajzenstat concludes, “the creation of Parliament was the central event of Confederation.”

Canadians, Ajzenstat says, should take pride in this historical reality because it helps sustain their liberal democratic order. Or, to put it differently, Canadian intellectuals should abandon their breast-beating at the lack of a national identity, and thank their lucky stars they live in political order that prizes peace, order and good government over spurious and politically dangerous notions of belonging. “Our identity as a nation rests on the fact that we are all, equally, entitled to peace, order, and good government. In short, our national identity rests on the fact that our national institutions are inclusive. All are subject to the rule of law. Parliament speaks for all.”

Admittedly, parliamentarians often fail to live up to this institutional ideal. But then it hasn’t helped that Parliament’s inclusive capacities have been undermined by the Charter of Rights and the politicization of the judiciary. However, according to Ajzenstat, if Canadians want to do anything about this, want to restore the purpose and meaning of Parliament, they should look to their Lockean legacy.

Of course, some will quarrel with Ajzenstat’s claim, arguing that she underestimates the psychological need for people to feel a deeper sense of belonging than respect for institutions such as Parliament can provide. As David Taras, one of those ‘identity scholars’ Ajzenstat criticizes, once said, Canadians have “a passion for identity.” So it seems. Many English-speaking Canadians, myself included, have often wished the ‘country beyond Quebec’ had a stronger sense of national identity. But it is also true that Canadians’ historical preoccupation has been with catering to differences, not forging sameness. We have by and large settled for peaceful coexistence rather than risk attempts to impose existential unity. Indeed, as Ramsay Cook pointed out four decades ago, our institutional orders were deliberately designed to “blur” the differences between Canadians sufficiently so they could live together within a single state despite their inability to become a single nation. In this regard, perhaps Ajzenstat is right to insist that the creation of an overarching national identity in which all Canadians could see their reflection is impossible, and that it is best – or, at least, more politically prudent – to stick with the Lockean formulas on which Canada was founded.

Such a view is an obvious challenge to the communitarians among us, including Charles Taylor, who has questioned what he sees as the socially fragmenting consequences of Locke’s liberal theories. But it also a rebuttal of George Grant, who famously lamented Canada’s disappearance into the American empire and proclaimed the failure of Lockean liberalism to withstand the moral nihilism of modern technology. In Ajzenstat’s view, the

country that Grant lamented as lost was a “romantic fiction” of his imagination. As far as she is concerned the only thing Canadians have lost is an appreciation for their real founding father, John Locke. His concepts of parliamentary sovereignty, the separation of church and state and the autonomy of the individual have, on the whole, served liberal democracies like Canada well, she argues. At any rate, we have not yet come up with anything better. The institutions created by the Fathers of Confederation, drawing on Locke’s political philosophy, remain “more coherent than the proposals for multiculturalism offered by today’s students of Canadian identity.” Thus, Ajzenstat concludes: “Our present-day quarrels about national identity and our ignorance of Locke’s role in Confederation are factors contributing to the erosion of Canadian democracy.”



Ajzenstat’s charge against Grant – and, by implication, her rejection of “Tory touch” romanticism – is taken seriously by University of Toronto political philosopher Harold Donald Forbes in his new book, *George Grant: A Guide to His Thought*. There is no question, Forbes says, that Grant had considerable influence on how Canadians think about their country’s politics, and, thus, it is not unreasonable for Ajzenstat to challenge his view of Canada’s political culture. Indeed, he cites Ajzenstat’s argument from *The Once and Future Canadian Democracy* – “He [Grant] taught us to disdain liberal democracy and he offered nothing in its place.” – as a prime example of the kind of critique that has been leveled against Grant. But Forbes also notes that others have presented similar objections to Grant’s thought, and, in his view, they generally fall short to one degree or another in understanding Grant.

Such a response underscores the intent of Forbes’ “guide.” Under the sectional rubrics of politics, philosophy and religion, Forbes devotes some 300 pages to penetrating beneath many of the labels with which Grant’s thought as a whole has been tagged. Grant’s conservatism and “nationalism,” his critique of atomistic liberalism, his fears regarding the nihilistic direction of modernity, the major influences on his thought (Hegel, Simone Weil, Leo Strauss, etc.) and his claims about the “impossibility of Canada” – Forbes weave all these various threads of Grant’s intellectual life into a single tapestry. His purpose is to tap the fundamental principles that informed Grant’s thinking, to relate his political thought to its philosophical and theological sources.

Consider, for example, his response to those who regard Grant as an illiberal pessimist or charge him with indulging in Anglo-Saxon nostalgia. Such critiques, says Forbes, betray the modern tendency to explain everything in terms of psychology, as though Grant’s “pessimism” reflects a character flaw rather than a philosophical position. Too many critics fail to grasp that Grant was

challenging them “to look more closely at our way of life and the language we use to describe it.”

Forbes effectively does the same thing, ranging widely across Grant’s intellectual career to produce a lucid and comprehensive overview of his thought as a whole. He demonstrates conclusively how Grant’s philosophy and religion relate to his politics and morality, and how he leads his readers “from their practical political preoccupations to a clearer understanding of their philosophical and religious origins.”

There have been other more specialized scholarly studies of Grant in recent years — Harris Athanasiadis’ masterful 2001 examination of Grant’s theological roots, *George Grant and the Theology of the Cross*, for example — but Forbes’ book is directed at those readers with some acquaintance with Grant “who want help in reaching a better understanding of his provocative claims.” Forbes certainly delivers on his stated purpose. He is not content merely to summarize Grant’s thought. He does an excellent job of peeling back the layers of Grant’s thinking to both reveal and explicate its sources and significance. Forbes rightly advises that readers need to understand that the quick and easy labels often applied to Grant — nationalist, Red Tory, anti-American, etc. — are at best “blazes at the head of a trail that leads us from its starting point and that will eventually return the persistent explorer to that point with a new understanding of their meaning.”

Not surprisingly, Forbes starts with what is most familiar about Grant — his ostensible nationalism, and how the publication of *Lament for a Nation* in 1965 sparked an intense period of nationalism in Canada. Except it was not that simple. Grant, he says, “revealed the pathos of Canadian nationalism and pointed beyond it.”

The fact is Grant consistently denied having nationalistic motives for the book. He explicitly refers in *Lament* to “the impossibility of Canada.” Moreover, he is straightforward about why Canada has come to an “end”: The principles or ideas upon which the country was founded had given way to those of the American Republic. These ‘American’ principles promote social and political arrangements that make particular cultures and nations like Canada redundant. Since Canadians on the whole believe the principles of modernity are right and proper, they have little reason to maintain an independent political existence. Hence, Grant concluded that Canada is impossible as a sovereign nation-state because of the “character of the modern age.” It was a judgment he would reiterate several times until his death in 1988. Even in later years, while acknowledging the “traces of care” shown by Pierre Trudeau’s nationalist policies, Grant maintained that “below the surface the movement towards integration continues.” As late as 1985, in an interview with Larry Schmidt, Grant insisted he had not been trying to promote the nationalist cause in *Lament*: “Because people quite rightly want finite hopes, people have read a little book I wrote wrongly. I was talking about the *end* of Canadian nationalism. I was saying that

this is over and people read it as if I was making an appeal for Canadian nationalism. I think that is just nonsense. I think they just read it wrongly.”

Forbes acknowledges that readers may find Grant’s lament hard to take seriously, given the self-evident reality of Canada’s continued political existence. Hence, there is a need to uncover the thought behind his thought. “To understand the necessity of Canada’s disappearance — to understand what has disappeared and why — one must understand what the most influential thinkers have thought about human good.”

Grant saw the essence of contemporary liberalism as the identification of freedom and technology. Secular man believes his freedom requires control of the world, and this is to be accomplished through technology. It was this largely unthinking ascription to the technological imperative of the modern project that fated Canada to disappear. When Grant declared “the impossibility of Canada” he meant that the nation had abandoned its former intention to preserve itself as different and distinct from the United States. Canada ceased to be a sovereign nation not because its formal political existence had come to an end, but because the ‘ideas’ that provided its reasons for existence were no longer preserved in any substantive way. This wasn’t anti-Americanism on Grant’s part, simply a recognition of the way things were. With no common intention beyond the liberal-progressivist promise of freedom and material satisfaction, Canadians had unthinkingly given themselves over to the technological ethos exemplified in the American empire. The result was a ‘country’ that, as Donald Creighton once stated, was merely “a good place to live.”¹

Grant’s understanding of Canada’s fate was captured in the phrase “the universal and homogeneous state” that he appropriated from Alexandre Kojève, the French Hegel exegete who interpreted Hegel’s philosophy as the penultimate expression of the modern project. Grant was persuaded to this view of the universal and homogeneous state by Leo Strauss’s judgment regarding the implications of Kojève’s theory. As Grant put it in *Lament for a Nation*: “If the best social order is the universal and homogeneous state, then the disappearance of Canada can be understood as a step towards that order.”

By Grant’s argument, then, we now dwell in a post-Canadian world. While we might retain the formal trappings of nationhood — a flag, a border, Parliament, Dominion Day (or, rather, Canada Day, as the progressives call it), etc. — little of significant ‘national’ substance or sovereignty remains.

Such a conclusion suggests that Grant’s reputation as “a father of Canadian nationalism,” as Clifford Orwin claimed in a review of Grant’s *English-Speaking Justice*, needs to be re-evaluated. But then so too should the notion that Grant’s lament was merely nostalgia for some pre-war myth of Canada’s Britishness. Grant knew his thought was informed by his “being part of a class which is disappearing,” but he also insisted, in an interview

published in *George Grant in Process* (1978), that only “simple people” would settle for interpreting *Lament* as sadness at “the passing of the British dream of Canada.”

Forbes comes to a similar conclusion, but along the way the reader is shown how and why Grant’s philosophical and theological investigations lead him to this “pessimistic” view of Canada’s fate. Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, along with Simone Weil and Leo Strauss, were among Grant’s many interlocutors, and Forbes does a masterful job in explicating what it was in their thought that so strongly influenced Grant’s. He is particularly good at explaining how a “modern” such as Grant could regard himself as a “Platonist within Christianity” and still maintain philosophical coherence. And he provides one of the best commentaries of which I am aware on Grant’s relationship to Weil, both in his admiration and his ambivalence.

Forbes also devotes the better part of three chapters to explicating Strauss’s influence on Grant. The German-American political philosopher was, he says, instrumental in breaking Grant out of the magic circle of liberal-progressivism that dominated the post-war era. In particular, Strauss helped Grant get a handle on the historicism of both Nietzsche and Heidegger and what their thought signified about modern nihilism.

However, there is another aspect of Strauss’s influence for which Forbes provides only a partial account. Forbes notes that Grant’s writing style can be a “source of difficulties” for reader, but he does not follow through in developing this insight by devoting more attention to Grant’s appropriation of Strauss’s notion of indirect or esoteric writing, and the implication that an understanding of *how* Grant wrote helps reveal *what* he said.

Grant was a very public philosopher. He was actively engaged in the life of his society, lecturing on radio programs and writing articles for newspapers and popular magazines. Nonetheless, he was often criticized for not offering a way out of the darkness of the modern project. It is an inadequate critique because it fails to take into account Grant’s appropriation of Strauss’s distinction between what is true and what can be told about those truths. According to Strauss, there are truths that simply cannot be stated in a didactic manner, or spoken in a completely exoteric fashion, if they are to be given a hearing. The truth must sometimes be offered indirectly. Strauss pointed to the classical philosophers who, he says, regularly disguised their true teachings to avoid rejection of their message, persecution or social ostracism. On the exoteric level the uninitiated reader is offered arguments that appear acceptable to the prevailing *doxa*. But it requires a closer reading to perceive the hidden, or esoteric, truth that may be at odds with the prevailing climate of opinion and, hence, more subversive of the social and political order.

Grant took Strauss’s instruction about writing-between-the-line seriously and adopted its techniques. Not because he thought he would be physically persecuted (although the way he was treated by the academic

establishment in Ontario might constitute mental persecution), but rather because he recognized that what he had to say would not please or flatter those who defended the prevailing *doxa*. As Grant once stated, “I have always written indirectly because I knew that the intellectual world I inhabited was very hostile to both the figures I chiefly admired [Socrates and Christ]. That’s why I have written indirectly.”

Forbes acknowledges this esoteric aspect to Grant’s writing, referring, for instance, to the 1978 book, *English-Speaking Justice*, in which Grant says that he has, in Forbes’s words, “no language for the discussion of politics and morality but that of our liberal political tradition, and it puts almost inescapable constraints on what can be said about patriotism and religion without seeming to be fundamentally irrational or reactionary.” Nevertheless, a more extensive consideration of Grant’s indirection would have added another dimension to Forbes’ otherwise comprehensive analysis of the Strauss-Grant relationship.

That said, Forbes is most helpful in explaining Grant’s apparent silence on matters of deep concern, his unwillingness, presumably deliberate, not to push an argument to its ultimate conclusion, his frequent allusions and, finally, his coded references to other thinkers. For instance, Grant’s use of the word “technology” was highly elusive, as well as allusive. Grant was not referring merely to the tools and instruments by which we attempt to master nature, but also to a way of thinking, an ontological consciousness. Likewise, Grant’s cryptic references allusion to Plato, Augustine, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Strauss, etc. opens the door to the deep levels of his own thinking. As Forbes says, “To begin to understand his affinity with any one of these outstanding thinkers is to penetrate well below the surface of what he wrote, not by tracing its ‘sources,’ which were far more diverse ... but rather by grasping its ‘logic’ or inner coherence.”

In other words, to borrow an old Socratic metaphor, the reader of Grant’s writings needs to be like a hunter engaged in tracking his prey. The reader must learn the terrain of Grant’s thought and rightly interpret the signs of its movement in order to track it to its philosophical lair. Forbes’s book is the intellectual equivalent of hunting with an experienced and knowledgeable guide, showing the reader the signs of other philosophic sources, interpreting the direction of conceptual footprints, pointing out the blazes of Grant’s thought. His language is at all times clear and lucid and reader-friendly. Jargon is kept to a minimum, and, when used, thoroughly explained. I think Grant himself would have been pleased with Forbes’s guide.

And that might explain why you finish Forbes’s book with the oddest sensation — you wish it hadn’t been necessary to write. You wish Grant had produced his own *magnum opus*. This is not to fault Forbes in any way; indeed, it makes his work more praiseworthy. At various times over his career Grant sketched out books on numerous weighty subjects, including, as Forbes notes, a

book analyzing Heidegger's thought on Platonic philosophy. Yet none of these big projects came to fruition. By the time you close Forbes' book you cannot help but wonder if it could have been otherwise. Grant possessed one of the most probing and courageous philosophic minds that Canada has ever produced. Who knows what he might have achieved — a Templeton Prize, perhaps — and how wide his influence might have been had he produced a philosophic work on the scale of, say, Heidegger or Spinoza or Augustine. But that was not Grant's fate. It is to Forbes's credit that he has provided the next best thing, a study that makes you wish Grant had lived longer and written more.



Oddly enough, the same thing can be said about Alexander John Watson's "full-scale intellectual biography" of Harold Adams Innis.

Innis, of course, hardly needs an introduction. Between 1924 and his death in 1952, the farm boy, war veteran and social scientist became one of Canada's most influential intellectuals, producing a body of work that altered how Canadians thought about their country. Even now, more than half a century later, his ideas are still studied in graduate schools across Canada, as well as in the United States and Australia. Yet, despite this influence, the man himself has always been an enigma. Students at the University of Toronto's Innis College still sing a mocking song on pub-crawls, "Who the hell is Harold Innis?"

Alexander John Watson's *Marginal Man: The Dark Vision of Harold Innis*, attempts to answer that question in a massive work that is the product of some 25 years of researching and thinking about Innis's life and career. In effect, Watson applies Innis's own nitty-gritty, down-in-the-dirt research techniques to his subject. "I trust that by using the communications works as a window into his intellectual biography, I have produced a book that leads to a more profound understanding of Innis himself."

So he does. Watson provides a comprehensive — and likely definitive — intellectual portrait that traces Innis's life: his small-town childhood in Otterville, Ont.; his wounding in the First World War; the years wandering the intellectual wilderness in search of his "project"; the breakthrough books and the academic careerism; and, in the end, the pathos of a brilliant man dead at the peak of his intellectual powers.

If there is an image that captures Innis's character it has to be this one: In the summer of 1924, Innis, a then 30-year-old academic seeking the subject that would establish his scholarly credentials, was standing on a hill overlooking the wind-lashed waters of Great Slave Lake in the Northwest Territories. On the shore below, native men and women loaded boats, preparing for a season of hunting and fishing along the Mackenzie River. Innis would join them to follow the river north to the Beaufort Sea. It

was the first of many journeys he would take during his 32-year career at the University of Toronto. But it was these journeys — to the mines of the Yukon, the pulp mills of northern Ontario and Quebec, the fisheries of Maritimes — that would make his reputation.

But as Watson makes clear in his exemplary biography — and as the subtitle suggests — the tapestry of Innis's life was woven with dark thread. To read this biography is to encounter a man who, to paraphrase Nietzsche, looked into the abyss of the 20th century, and saw the abyss looking back. Arguably, it is also to see how the fate of one man can embody the fate of a nation.

Innis was no doubt the kind of man Charles Taylor has in mind when he refers to the spectre of meaninglessness that stalks the modern age. Innis, like Taylor, was only too well aware of the world's disenchantment. But unlike Taylor (and more like Grant), Innis found few sources within the modern project that might re-enchant the world in any deeply meaningful way. After a lifetime's study and reflection, Innis feared that beneath its bright technological facade, the West was in a slow-motion collapse. He was especially despairing about his own country. While most Canadians celebrated postwar prosperity, Innis thought Canadians were selling their sovereignty for the tinsel of an American lifestyle. Canada, he concluded, had gone "from colony to nation to colony."

Watson traces Innis's dark vision to the corpse-strewn slopes of Vimy Ridge where in 1917 a piece of shrapnel ripped open Innis's leg. Previous interpreters of Innis tended to gloss over Innis's war experience. Watson makes it central, showing how it informed his scholarship. In the fall of 1916 he was sent overseas as a private in an artillery battery. A few months later, in July of 1917, he was badly wounded and shipped home in March of 1918. Innis was one of 237 students from McMaster University who had enlisted. By 1918, only 105 were still enrolled. Twenty-three were dead and three times that number wounded.

Innis, says Watson, "would spend the rest of his life trying to deal with the impact of such losses." Indeed, the Great War was "a prime mover" for Innis, a "scarcely invisible force that set his personality" and imposed the subjects he would tackle in his scholarship. While still recovering from his wound, Innis completed his master of arts degree, writing on the subject of "The Returned Soldier." That was followed by a doctorate and a thesis on the Canadian Pacific Railway at the University of Chicago, where he came under the tutelage of the iconoclastic Thorstein Veblen. In 1920, he took a position at the University of Toronto, returning, says Watson, "with a sense of mission firmly bound to the idea of an intellectual project."

The war turned Innis into a patriot. He melded his love of country with his career, identifying his intellectual pursuits with the fate of Canada. As historian Donald Creighton wrote in his short 1957 hagiographical sketch of Innis, "He felt obscurely that he must work for Canada.

Canadians must explain their new nation to the outside world. Above all, Canadians must understand themselves.”

In the early 20th century, there were those who regarded Canada’s political existence as an artificial construct contrary to geographical logic. Innis rejected this view in his most influential work, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History*, published in 1930. In this book, Innis set forth his “staples theory” of Canadian history, arguing that Canada “emerged not in spite of geography, but because of it.”

Canada’s development flowed naturally from the pattern of river systems that stretched west and north from the St. Lawrence River, Innis argued. These rivers provided the means by which the products of the hinterland could reach the metropolitan centres. Thus, Canada’s often lamented historical role as an exporter of natural resources — fur, timber, fish, grain, minerals and oil — had, in fact, determined its economic and political development.

Innis later extended the geographic determinism of the staples thesis to communications, asserting that civilizations are “profoundly influenced by communication and that marked changes in communications have had important implications.” For example, the print revolution that began in the 15th century fostered liberal individualism and democratic institutions by tapping the psychology of privacy engendered by the solitary act of reading.

Such thinking laid the groundwork for a new intellectual discipline; Innis became the founding father of departments of communications and media studies throughout the western world. As Watson puts it, “[W]ithout the precedent of Innis’s communications essays, it would have been difficult for [Marshall] McLuhan to write.”

For Innis, the duty of a scholar was to seek the patterns of order behind the seeming chaos of history. He thought those who could do that best were the “peripheral intellectuals” like him, says Watson. “He believed that the continued vitality of Western civilization depended on the efforts of individual thinkers whose marginal position in relation to the great centres of that civilization allowed them to develop new critical perspectives.” What made Innis’s vision so dark was his awareness that the margins were disappearing, that places for independent thought and different ideas were being assimilated under the imperatives of technology. For Innis, Watson says, “the quiet that had stimulated thought on the margin has been replaced by a cacophony of noise and data available everywhere.”

Given Innis’s identification of his project and his country, his awareness that he would not live long enough to develop his new theories of communications undoubtedly encouraged him to think that his fate and Canada’s were connected. That might sound like narcissism but world-changing events often begin as an idea in the mind of some obscure intellectual on the periphery of power. Think of Socrates in the *agora* of Athens, Hegel watching Napoleon from his apartment window in Jena, Marx

dreaming of revolution in his London hovel. Innis, arguably, saw the same connection between the life of thought and the life of action. After all, as he pointed out in his 1950 book, *Empire and Communications*, it was Phoenician sailors plying their trade on the margins of the Egyptian and Babylonian empires who invented our alphabet. And it was Celts on the margins of the collapsing Roman Empire who preserved the learning that eventually allowed Europe to recover. And so, says Watson, “He began to conceive of the university as the secularized heir to the monastic tradition that kept Western culture alive during the Dark Age.”

Innis knew he was regarded as a Cassandra by many of his contemporaries. He understood that as a scholar on the margins he could only stand and watch while those at the centre used power without understanding. “The most cruel pang a man can bear — to have much insight and power over nothing,” he once said. This is not to say that Innis’ vision is invariably dark. After all, as Roy MacSkimming has commented: “He believed that creative ideas needed to renew Western civilization would arise from the margins of empire, where minds were still open, free of the bias of imperial paradigms.”

The notion recalls the implicit question with which I began this essay: How do we account for the rise in the reputation of Canadian thinkers? Surely no one can any longer seriously suggest that Canadians are making no contribution to the discussion of those intellectual, moral and spiritual issues underlying the contemporary chaos of the world. Is it because, as Katherine Fierlbeck suggests, Canada is “a cultural canary in a global coalmine?” Is it because our vast geography, ethnically diverse population and proximity to the American behemoth has forced us, in the words of Leslie Armour and Elizabeth Trott, to seek out “ideas that were capable of spanning spaces and which could link subcultures which, because of their distribution, tended to grow in significantly different ways?” Or perhaps it is as political theorist Leah Bradshaw once said in a letter to the *Globe and Mail*: “It may be that a country on the periphery of imperial ambition produces a superior reflective consciousness.”

No doubt, a case for each of these views can be made. I’m inclined, however, to believe — and I think the four books I’ve considered bolster this view — that Bradshaw is closer to the mark. The prospect of imminent death, it is said, greatly concentrates the mind. So, too, presumably, does the prospect of a nation’s or a civilization’s political demise force its intelligentsia to do some serious thinking. In the last three decades — certainly since Underhill’s 1964 lament — Canada has had a few near-death experiences, politically-speaking. The end of the Cold War and the emergence of a new Age of Terror have forced Canadians to peer out from beneath the protection of the American nuclear umbrella. Maybe they don’t like what they see.

Philosophy, as Hegel long ago pointed out, emerges almost inevitably in response to social and political

conflicts and crises, when a particular way of life is changing or disappearing. People turn to philosophy in times of uncertainty, when historical shifts erode and transform past traditions and practices. Of course, we should remember, as Hegel's famous image of the Owl of Minerva indicates, that philosophy comes into its own only after things have started to fall apart. Given the high quality of thought being generated by Canadian philosophic thinkers, maybe the rest of us should be worried about the fate of our country and our civilization.

¹ Quoted by journalist Charles Taylor, *Radical Tories* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1982), 23. Creighton's remark is worth quoting in full because it was offered some 25 years before others began acknowledging that Canada had become what novelist Yann Martel referred to as the "greatest hotel on Earth." Creighton expressed the same sentiment this way: "Well, it's still a good place to live, but that's all Canada is now — just a good place to live."

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