

The Intellectual Development of the Canadian People

John George Bourinot

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THE INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE CANADIAN PEOPLE

AN HISTORICAL REVIEW

BY JOHN GEORGE BOURINOT

PREFATORY NOTE.

This series of papers has been prepared in accordance with a plan marked out by the writer, some years ago of taking up, from time to time, certain features of the social, political and industrial progress of the Dominion. Essays on the Maritime Industry and the National Development of Canada have been read before the Royal Colonial Institute in England, and have been so favourably received by the Press of both countries, that the writer has felt encouraged to continue in the same course of study, and supplement his previous efforts by an historical review of the intellectual progress of the Canadian people.

HOUSE OF COMMONS, OTTAWA, February 17th, 1881.

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CHAPTER I.

EFFECT OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHANGES ON MENTAL DEVELOPMENT.

Should the title of this review come by any chance under the notice of some of those learned gentlemen who are delving among Greek roots or working out abstruse mathematical problems in the great academic seats on the banks of the Cam or Isis, they would probably wonder what can be said on the subject of the intellectual development of a people engaged in the absorbing practical work of a Colonial dependency. To such eminent scholars Canada is probably only remarkable as a country where even yet there is, apparently, so little sound scholarship that vacancies in classical and mathematical chairs have to be frequently filled by gentlemen who have distinguished themselves in the Universities of the parent state. Indeed, if we are to judge from articles and books that appear from time to time in England with reference to this country, Englishmen in general know very little of the progress that has been made in culture since Canada has become the most important dependency of Great Britain, by virtue of her material progress within half a century. Even the Americans who live alongside of us, and would be naturally supposed to be pretty well informed as to the progress of the Dominion to their north, appear for the most part ignorant of the facts of its development in this particular. It was but the other day that a writer of some ability, in an organ of religious opinion, referred to the French Canadians as a people speaking only inferior French, and entirely wanting in intellectual vigour. Nor is this fact surprising when we consider that there are even some Canadians who do not appear to have that knowledge which they ought to have on such a subject, and take many opportunities of concealing their ignorance by depreciating the intellectual efforts of their countrymen. If so much ignorance or indifference prevails with respect to the progress of Canada in this respect, it must be admitted--however little flattering the admission may be to our national pride--that it is, after all, only the natural sequel of colonial obscurity. It is still a current belief abroad--at least in Europe--that we are all so much occupied with the care of our material interests, that we are so deeply absorbed by the grosser conditions of existence in a new country, that we have little opportunity or leisure to cultivate those things which give refinement and tone to social life. Many persons lose sight of the fact that Canada, young though she is compared with the countries of the Old World, has passed beyond the state of mere colonial pupilage. One very important section of her population has a history contemporaneous with the history of the New England States, whose literature is read wherever the English tongue is spoken. The British population have a history which goes back over a century, and it is the record of an industrious, enterprising people who have made great political and social progress. Indeed it may be said that the political and material progress that these two sections of the Canadian people have conjointly made is of itself an evidence of their mental capacity. But whilst reams are written on the industrial progress of the Dominion with the praiseworthy object of bringing additional capital and people into the country, only an incidental allusion is made now and then to the illustrations of mental activity which are found in its schools, in its press, and even in its literature. It is now the purpose of the present writer to show that, in the essential elements of intellectual development, Canada is making not a rapid but certainly at least a

steady and encouraging progress, which proves that her people have not lost, in consequence of the decided disadvantages of their colonial situation, any of the characteristics of the races to whom they owe their origin. He will endeavour to treat the subject in the spirit of an impartial critic, and confine himself as closely as possible to such facts as illustrate the character of the progress, and give much encouragement for the future of a country even now only a little beyond the infancy of its material as well as intellectual development.

It is necessary to consider first the conditions under which the Dominion has been peopled, before proceeding to follow the progress of intellectual culture. So far, the history of Canada may be divided into three memorable periods of political and social development. The first period lasted during the years of French dominion; the second, from the Conquest to the Union of 1840, during which the provinces were working out representative institutions; the third, from 1840 to 1867, during which interval the country enjoyed responsible government, and entered on a career of material progress only exceeded by that of the great nation on its borders. Since 1867, Canada has commenced a new period in her political development, the full results of which are yet a problem, but which the writer believes, in common with all hopeful Canadians, will tend eventually to enlarge her political condition, and place her in a higher position among communities. It is only necessary, however, to refer particularly to the three first periods in this introductory chapter, which is merely intended to show as concisely as possible those successive changes in the social and political circumstances of the provinces, which have necessarily had the effect of stimulating the intellectual development of the people.

Religion and commerce, poverty and misfortune, loyalty and devotion to the British Empire, have brought into the Dominion of Canada the people who, within a comparatively short period of time, have won from the wilderness a country whose present condition is the best evidence of their industrial activity. Religion was a very potent influence in the settlement of New France. It gave to the country--to the Indian as well as to the Frenchman--the services of a zealous, devoted band of missionaries who, with unfaltering courage, forced their way into the then trackless West, and associated their names to all time with the rivers, lakes, and forests of that vast region, which is now the most productive granary of the world. In the wake of these priestly pioneers followed the trader and adventurer to assist in solving the secrets of unknown rivers and illimitable forests. From the hardy peasantry of Normandy and Brittany came reinforcements to settle the lands on the banks of the St Lawrence and its tributary rivers, and lay the foundations of the present Province of Quebec. The life of the population, that, in the course of time, filled up certain districts of the province, was one of constant restlessness and uncertainty which prevented them ever attaining a permanent prosperity. When the French regime disappeared with the fall of Quebec and Montreal, it can hardly be said there existed a Canadian people distinguished for material or intellectual activity. At no time under the government of France had the voice of the 'habitants' any influence in the councils of their country. A bureaucracy, acting directly under the orders of the King of France, managed public affairs; and the French Canadian of those times, very unlike his rival in New England, was a mere automaton, without any political significance whatever. The communities of people that were settled on the St. Lawrence and in Acadia were sunk in an intellectual lethargy--the natural consequence not only of their hard struggle for existence, but equally of their inability to take a part in the

government of the country. It was impossible that a people who had no inducement to study public affairs--who could not even hold a town or parish meeting for the establishment of a public schools--should give many signs of mental vigour. Consequently, at the time of the Conquest, the people of the Canadian settlements seemed to have no aspirations for the future, no interest in the prosperity or welfare of each other, no real bonds of unity. The very flag which floated above them was an ever-present evidence of their national humiliation.

So the first period of Canadian history went down amid the deepest gloom, and many years passed away before the country saw the gleam of a brighter day. On one side of the English Channel, the King of France soon forgot his mortification at the loss of an unprofitable 'region of frost and snow;' on the other side, the English Government looked with indifference, now that the victory was won, on the acquisition of an alien people who were likely to be a source of trouble and expense. Then occurred the War of American Independence, which aroused the English Ministry from their indifference and forced into the country many thousands of resolute, intelligent men, who gave up everything in their devotion to one absorbing principle of loyalty. The history of these men is still to be written as respects their real influence on the political and social life of the Canadian Provinces. A very superficial review, however, of the characteristics of these pioneers will show that they were men of strong opinions and great force of character--valuable qualities in the formation of a new community. If, in their Toryism, they and their descendants were slow to change their opinions and to yield to the force of those progressive ideas necessary to the political and mental development of a new country, yet, perhaps, these were not dangerous characteristics at a time when republicanism had not a few adherents among those who saw the greater progress and prosperity of the people to the south of the St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes. These men were not ordinary immigrants, drawn from the ignorant, poverty-stricken classes of an Old World; they were men of a time which had produced Otis, Franklin, Adams, Hancock and Washington--men of remarkable energy and intellectual power. Not a few of these men formed in the Canadian colony little centres from which radiated more or less of intellectual light to brighten the prevailing darkness of those rough times of Canadian settlement. The exertions of these men, combined with the industry of others brought into the country by the hope of making homes and fortunes in the New World, opened up, in the course of years, the fertile lands of the West. Then two provinces were formed in the East and West, divided by the Ottawa River, and representative government was conceded to each. The struggles of the majority to enlarge their political liberties and break the trammels of a selfish bureaucracy illustrate the new mental vigour that was infused into the French Canadian race by the concession of the parliamentary system of 1792. The descendants of the people who had no share whatever in the government under French rule had at last an admirable opportunity of proving their capacity for administering their own affairs, and the verdict of the present is, that, on the whole, whatever mistakes were committed by their too ardent and impulsive leaders, they showed their full appreciation of the rights that were justly theirs as the people of a free colonial community. Their minds expanded with their new political existence, and a new people were born on the banks of the St. Lawrence.

At the same time the English-speaking communities of Upper Canada and the Maritime Provinces advanced in mental vigour with the progress of the struggle for more liberal institutions. Men of no ordinary intellectual power were created by that political agitation which forced

the most indifferent from that, mental apathy, natural perhaps to a new country, where a struggle for mere existence demands such unflagging physical exertion. It is, however, in the new era that followed the Union that we find the fullest evidence of the decided mental progress of the Canadian communities. From that date the Canadian Provinces entered on a new period of industrial and mental activity. Old jealousies and rivalries between the different races of the country became more or less softened by the closer intercourse, social and political, that the Union brought about. During the fierce political conflicts that lasted for so many years in Lower Canada--those years of trial for all true Canadians--the division between the two races was not a mere line, but apparently a deep gulf, almost impossible to be bridged in the then temper of the contending parties. No common education served to remove and soften the differences of origin and language. The associations of youth, the sports of childhood, the studies by which the character of manhood is modified, were totally distinct. [Footnote: Report of Lord Durham on Canada, pp. 14-15.] With the Union of 1840, unpalatable as it was to many French Canadians who believed that the measure was intended to destroy their political autonomy, came a spirit of conciliation which tended to modify, in the course of no long time, the animosities of the past, and awaken a belief in the good will and patriotism of the two races, then working side by side in a common country, and having the same destiny in the future. And with the improvement of facilities for trade and intercourse, all sections were brought into those more intimate relations which naturally give an impulse not only to internal commerce but to the intellectual faculties of a people. [Footnote: Lord Macaulay says on this point: Every improvement of the means of locomotion benefits mankind morally and intellectually, as well as materially, and not only facilitates the interchange of the various productions of nature and art, but tends to remove natural and provincial antipathies and to bind together all the branches of the human family.] During the first years of the settlement of Canada there was a vast amount of ignorance throughout the rural districts, especially in the western Province. Travellers who visited the country and had abundant opportunities of ascertaining its social condition, dwelt pointedly on the moral and intellectual apathy that prevailed outside a few places like York or other centres of intelligence; but they forgot to make allowance for the difficulties that surrounded these settlers. The isolation of their lives had naturally the effect of making even the better class narrow-minded, selfish, and at last careless of anything like refinement. Men who lived for years without the means of frequent communication with their fellow-men, without opportunities for social, instructive in

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