

BOOK REVIEWS

The Forked Road: Canada, 1939-1957

Donald G. Creighton. *The Forked Road: Canada, 1939-1957*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976. Pp. xii, 319. \$14.95.

A Canadian historian thinking about D. G. Creighton's works is in a position not unlike that of a German, similarly placed in the 1880's, thinking about Ranke. Perhaps Froude in England during the early 1890's, and Lavissee in France after 1918, provide equally persuasive parallels. All four of these writers shared an "official" and enviable historiographical position in their respective scholarly communities. Their productivity was apparently increased after they reached retirement age, and their influence on younger writers continued unabated. A reviewer takes on scholars such as these at his peril.

In the case of Creighton, however, and this is particularly true for an historian of education, the risk is worth taking. Creighton is one of that group of Canadian historians, traditionally educated and politically-constitutionally minded, who have had to make sense of the social history research done in Canada since the last War. It is an interesting question in educational history just how Creighton came to take seriously the "new" history — if he has indeed taken it into account at all. If Creighton has done so, those interested in the history of education will be curious to know if he has handled that special theme with acuity and justice.

As it turns out, Creighton's *The Forked Road: Canada, 1939-1957* shows that

- (a) he has read most recent general Canadian social history;
- (b) he takes this research into account, but not seriously; and
- (c) compared to other social themes (the histories of labour, the new populism of the post-War period, urban-industrial poverty, women, government bureaucracy, welfare statism, demographic change, transport-and-community, etc.), education fares badly.

To illustrate these contentions, it may be useful to list the main themes of Creighton's book, and attempt to see if social-historical explanations are required by the themes. His treatment of education may then be more understandable.

From the first chapter on, several themes familiar to Creighton *habitués* play a critical part in discussion. Mackenzie King is made to appear duplicitous and inane. Creighton thinks his mere presence in the office of Prime Minister was a cause of Canadian misfortunes after 1918. The twin themes of King's stupidity, and of Canadian demographic weakness, are made to explain the country's increasing dependence on the United States, its "new suzerain."

Readers of Prof. Creighton's recent non-historical writings may be surprised that he makes the past tell this tale of decadence. Not everyone, for instance, would agree that Canada's part in World War II, the Korean conflict, and the Suez affair were dictated *entirely* by British and American requirements. Nor is it fair to say that Pearson and King proceeded without popular support to adopt the policies they did in international affairs. One is driven to conclude that Creighton has read into the past his well known pessimism about Canada's chances of political survival in North America.

Creighton's writing partly escapes charges of anachronism and prejudice because he presents much of the evidence needed to refute his own assertions.

Consider, for instance, the adoption of social security measures in Canada. Creighton describes the urbanizing population of Canada, the rapid economic expansion of post-1945 times, the growth of public demand for old age pensions without means tests, and the tax agreements between provinces — all of which contributed to the social security bonanza eventually topped off by the Canada Pension Plan. In *The Forked Road*, unfortunately, all of these "social" facts are not used to explain the triumphant welfarism of the period 1945-1967. Instead, Creighton insists that these measures were part of the Liberal Party's electoral bag of tricks, booty to be redistributed before elections. Because the booty was small in 1956, and coincidentally because of the Trans-Canada Pipeline scandal, the Liberals lost to Diefenbaker's Conservatives. It's as simple as that, or nearly. In *The Forked Road*, politics reign supreme.

When Creighton turns to education, science, and the arts, his approach is roughly similar. Once he has discussed the state of literature, art, and organized research (especially in Ch. 2 for the period ending in 1939, and Chapter 8 for 1945-1957), one has the feeling of having read one of the best descriptions extant of recent Canadian cultural history. Creighton balances his discussion of increasing enrolment in universities before and after the vertans' "bulge" with notes on educational controversy after the Massey Commission, the baby boom in public schools, and growing public willingness in the 1950's to spend large sums on education.

After these well written descriptions, however, one yearns for an explanation. Prof. Creighton drags out two by now worn explanations — the Canadian search for cultural uniqueness (i.e., fear of American cultural dominance), and the St. Laurent Liberals' desperate need for advice. One guesses that "education" was at the back of very few minds even when the Canada Council was founded, using private bequests! The Liberals, tyrannical party of government, were merely garnering another thousand votes.

This is, of course, incredible. In the same book, Creighton argues

- (1) that educational planning and expenditures were undertaken by political decision, both provincially and nationally, in the same way traditional politics decided *all* government policy; and
- (2) that the gap between rich and poor, Anglo and non-Anglo, narrowed very little during the period 1939-1957.

Surely it is possible that members of Canada's less-privileged groups saw education as a means of overcoming their disadvantages. Especially during the 1940's and 1950's, when the lower middle class were more numerous than they are now, the pressure on government to extend educational opportunity was enormous. Old fashioned politics could not alone account for the educational history of Canada after 1945.

Prof. Creighton has not been able to resist the temptation to editorialize throughout *The Forked Road*. The Conservative party comes out looking pretty good withall. And yet, to a youngish reader barely able to remember the period 1939-1957, Creighton's tale is quite likely to lead to yet another conclusion: both old-line parties were bankrupt.

For all this, D. G. Creighton's new book is among the best of the Canadian Centenary Series. The fact that it mentions education often, and pays some attention to social history, makes it a worthy partner to Cook's and Brown's *A Nation Transformed* on turn-of-the-century Canada. One could only wish that *The Forked Road* had managed that most elusive of relationships, a marriage between political and social history.

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