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Janet Ajzenstat, Paul Romney, Ian Gentles, William D. Gairdner, eds. *Canada's Founding Debates.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. x + 463 pp. $35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8020-8607-5.

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"I believe our people have discovered that men who rise to be the heads of great parties are not of necessity villains and scoundrels" (p. 451). In an age when most political leaders are automatically viewed with skepticism, we might attribute sentiments such as these to some incurable optimist of the twentieth-first century. In fact, the quotation is taken from the words of Richard Cartwright, a member of the Legislative Assembly of the United Province of Canada, who was speaking in 1865 during what has subsequently become known as the Confederation Debates. No less than today, politicians of that era were frequently held in low regard. Idealists, it seemed, were in short supply. Self-interest ruled the day. And yet, as they contemplated the implications of a draft scheme of federation intended to unite the provinces and colonies of British North America into one country within the British Empire, many of the elected legislators seemed to rise above the normal partisan rancor. Young Cartwright, who could be as disputatious as anyone, noticed the more statesmanlike quality of the debate, and was inspired by it. So, too, were the editors of this book, *Canada's Founding Debates*.

Their aim, as set out in the introduction, is to present the supporters and opponents of Confederation "not merely as thinkers about their country but as thinkers about politics–men consciously acting within a tradition of political thought" (p. 1). It is wrong, state the editors, to dismiss the British North American politicians of 140 years ago as mere pragmatists, bearing "no strong commitment to political values, no interest in political ideas" (p. 1). Far from it. Many of the debaters were remarkably well read, and referred easily to philosophical ideas and constitutional precedents from Britain, the United States, and continental Europe. Regrettably in the view of Ajzenstat et al,, most Canadians (not excluding current politicians, media commentators, and tenured academics) do not know this story. While acknowledging the right of Canadians present and future to re-design their country as they see fit, the editoral team nonetheless feels an obligation to reacquaint the current generation with the views of their national forebears. "It is sensible to listen to the founders–and to their opponents–and consider what they have to say to us," they maintain, "not least because we are still for the most part living under the constitution they made" (pp. 1-2).

At the time the book was conceived, federalist Canadians were still reeling from the series of constitutional crises that began with the demise of the Meech Lake Accord in 1990, continued with the voters' rejection of the Charlottetown Accord two years later, and ended in the virtual-tie vote of the second Quebec referendum on sovereignty in 1995. The future of a united Canada appeared to be hanging by a thread. During that period, many voices rushed in with analysis of what the country's founders must have intended. Few there were who actually knew anything about the political ideas and debates of the Confederation era, however. In part, it was because reprints of key nineteenth-century Confederation documents by G. P. Browne and P. B. Waite in the Carleton Library series had themselves gone out of print.[1] A more fundamental reason was that the topic (Confederation) and the approach (political history) had both fallen out of style. Beginning in the 1970s, the "new" history and behavioral political science had both moved on to other topics and methodologies. No one, it seemed, was any longer interested in the antiquated views of a comparatively few, white, male, elitist, mid-Victorian political hacks. Boring!

The four co-editors of this book–comprised of Janet Ajzenstat, professor emeritus of political science at McMaster University; Paul Romney, long-time Canadian historian; Ian Gentles, professor of history at Glendon College, York University; and William D. Gairdner, independent scholar and author–beg to differ. Grounding current debates about Canada's political and constitutional future in an informed historical context is too important to them to be held hostage to scholarly trends and fashions. They root their analytical interest in an ongoing stream of Canadian historiography, albeit one largely interrupted since the 1960s. From the Confederation-within-the-Empire phase, through the colony-to-nation version, to the Centennial celebration of Confederation heroes and proud Canadian nationhood, Canada's constitutional evolution was a key theme of Anglo-Canadian historical writing. Ajzenstat et al. acknowledge their debt to these pioneering scholars, but they wish to push beyond previous interpretations, in two ways. First, they invite us to see past the pragmatic deal-making, and view the founders and their opponents as legitimate holders of real political ideas. Second, they desire to broaden the focus from John A. Macdonald, George-Etienne Cartier, George Brown, and the other leaders in the United Province of Canada, to encompass politicians of all stripes across the whole of British North America. Their approach is to present better than four hundred pages of excerpts from the actual debates carried out in the legislatures of not just Canada, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick, but also of Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland, British Columbia, and Red River. The time-span is 1864-73, from the first discussions of possible Maritime union to the entry of Prince Edward Island into the young Dominion of Canada.

Rather than organize the book's content by province or by year, the co-editors have chosen to divide it into themes. The five key topics are liberty, opportunity, identity, the nature of the new nationality, and the method of constitution-making. Under "Liberty" are chapters of excerpts devoted to the colonial politicians' views on constitutional liberty, responsible cabinet government, an appointive upper house, and an elective lower house based upon "rep by pop" (representation by population). The second section, "Opportunity," focuses on colonists' views of the assumed connections between individual liberty, equality of opportunity, and a common material prosperity. Section 3 is focused on the overlapping national identities of the British North Americans. Did they self-identify first as British, as (North) Americans, or as Canadians? Could someone belong to two, or even all three, of those identifications? The next section, entitled "What They Said about the New Nationality," is actually sub-divided into two very key topics: the nature of the federal union–federal, confederal, or de facto legislative–and the provisions for minority rights, be they ethnic, religious, or economic. Finally, part 5 considers the colonial legislators' views of how the proposed new constitution should be ratified. Was a direct reference to the voters via an election or referendum best, or was it sufficient to obtain a favorable vote in the legislature of each province or colony?

Perhaps surprisingly, the format works. This reviewer confesses to some initial skepticism, upon first perusal. Imagine for yourself 450 pages of material excerpted from politicians' speeches of 140 years ago, not presented either chronologically or regionally, and liberally garnished with editorializing footnotes from four co-editors. Sounds like a sure-fire cure for insomnia. At least such a weighty book will be useful as a doorstop, I thought, as I packed up for the rented summer cottage. In reality, I quickly found myself drawn into the discussions, not just among politicians of the nineteenth century, but also between the book's editors and those same political representatives, across more than a century. Some of the annotations provide the current-day reader with helpful context, identifying in fuller detail events or people that the speakers only briefly refer to. For example, Ian Gentles notes that England and Scotland entered a legislative union in 1707 (p. 130). At other times, they challenge the speaker's interpretation, what we might today refer to as the "spin" of the argument. For instance, Paul Romney asserts that a statement by Alexander Campbell of Canada, to the effect that what has not been done yet, cannot be done, "would preclude all constitutional innovation" (p. 445).

The real treat, though, is the frequently recurring topicality of what the colonial politicians themselves are saying. Speaking in 1865, John Robinson of New Brunswick saw clearly that central Canada "would be the preponderating power, and her influence would rule the rest" (p. 74). J. B. E. Dorion of Canada East referred tongue-in-cheek to the irrational anti-Americanism of some of his contemporaries when he spoke of the United States as "that country which people take so much pains to represent as the hotbed of all political, social, moral, and physical horrors" (p. 452). J. H. Cameron of Canada West might have been an early Preston Manning when he pleaded with Confederation's backers for an appeal to the voters. "Will you not find it stronger in the hearts and more deeply rooted in the estimation of the people

if you appeal to them and obtain their sanction to it and their support in carrying it out?" (p. 456). David Reesor, also of Canada West, raised another familiar present-day issue with respect to the selection of legislators for the Upper House. "Do not strike out the elective principle altogether," he urged (p. 89). Joseph Perrault of Canada East anticipated separatist arguments of the twentieth century when he lambasted British colonial policy as an intentional design to "annihilate us as a people. And this scheme of confederation is but the continued application of that policy on this continent; its real object is nothing but the annihilation of French influence in Canada" (p. 350). On the other hand, some comments seem decidedly out of place, such as the widespread though not universal aversion to democracy as being a synonym for mob rule and opposed to constitutional liberty. "When I speak of representation by population," John A. Macdonald declared straightforwardly, "the house will of course understand that universal suffrage is not in any way sanctioned" (p. 70).

One does wonder, in an age of instantaneous Internet communication and narrow present-mindedness, who the intended audience or market might be for this thick, and not inexpensive, tome. Certainly it deserves a place in any decent reference library, and should be required reading for any Canadian historian or political scientist who presumes to lecture or write on the topic of Canadian federalism, or Canadian political thought. Appropriately excerpted, it could usefully serve teachers and professors who are striving to convince their students that Confederation as we know it was not automatic, that the mid-century British North Americans had choices, and might have opted for other outcomes. Some of these exchanges deserve to be edited down to their pithy essences, and then read aloud or role-played in dramatic fashion. Who among us would not like the opportunity to read, nay perform, one of the following speeches: Richard Cartwright, "It is well for us that we have still the choice whether we will have statesman or stump orators to rule over us; whether this house shall maintain its honourable position as the representatives of a free people, or whether it shall sink into a mere mob of delegates, the nominees of caucuses and wire-pullers" (pp. 451-452), or J. B. E. Dorion, "It is quite enough that men should have been found guilty of misapplication of the public money, that they shall have abused each other as political robbers for ten years, to bring about a coalition of the combatants, to make them hug each other till all feeling of personal dignity is lost and all regard for principle is forgotten" (p. 453). Not quite Shakespeare at his best, but drama nonetheless.

Amidst the praise, there are some aspects of this book that could be improved in a future edition. The two maps, one of British North America in 1840 and the other of Canada in 1871, are helpful but the latter lacks political boundaries for New Brunswick. More seriously, the delightful thumbnail biographies of key colonial politicians spread throughout the book would be more useful if there were a table at the front, linking each with a specific page. There should be more explanation as to the rationale utilized for the selection and editing of excerpts. Much more had to be left out than could be included. Was the decision-making systematic, idiosyncratic, ideological? Was the emphasis placed upon including the typical, or the atypical comments? Similarly, what was the mandate of each co-editor? At times, as I read through the book, focusing on the excerpted debates from 140 years ago but veering down periodically to the editorial footnotes, I felt a nagging sense of *deja vu*. Then it dawned on me. The main part of the book was Bob Cole, longtime announcer of "Hockey Night In Canada," narrating the play-by-play action. The editorial annotations were like the contributions of Harry Neale, Don Cherry, and Ron McLean, offering their "expert" commentaries as they saw fit. With this metaphor in mind, more context in the introduction would be helpful to the reader, who knows (or ought to know) that Janet Ajzenstat, Paul Romney, Ian Gentles, and William D. Gairdner are no less biased than the politicians they are scrutinizing. It is not wrong for each of them to have a clear perspective. It is a weakness of the book not to say more about where each commentator is coming from. In the acknowledgements, Ajzenstat declares that *Canada's Founding Debates* "is a William D. Gairdner production. The conception, choice of researchers, and the energy behind the project are entirely his" (p. ix). Fair enough, but how does everyone else fit in?

The editorial team might also give more thought to the way they handle, or do not handle, inclusionary issues. While it may not be necessary to apologize for the absence of any "Mothers" of Confederation, still one would have thought there would be more in the way of explicit discussion of the gender bias in nineteenth-century politics, amongst the plethora of contextual footnotes. For example, we can perhaps forgive T. L. Wood of British Columbia for citing "the just rights of man" (p. 250). Can we be as tolerant of the co-editors? Similarly, some current-day readers may be uncomfortable with the ethno-centrism, if not outright racism, of many of the speakers. For instance, William Lawrence was

not unusual among anglophone speakers when he stated "wherever you find Englishmen, Irishmen, and Scotchmen, you will find that they carry with them the high qualities of their race" (p. 127). The annotated comment attached to this speech provides political context, but avoids the chauvinist anthropological assumptions altogether. A fascinating discussion of the rights of the Red River half-breeds, as opposed to their Indian kinsmen, completely avoids mentioning the underlying racist assumptions. James Ross, himself of mixed-blood origin, states forthrightly that "we can secure a certain kind of right by placing ourselves on the same footing as Indians. But in that case, we must decide on giving up our rights as civilized men" (pp. 248-249). Surely the blatant contradistinction of "Indians" and "civilized men" deserves comment from the editors. In fairness, there is a lengthy excerpt from the British Columbia debates (where First Nations people outnumbered European-descended Whites by perhaps four-to-one) as to whether the Native Indian population should be consulted about the proposed union with Canada (pp. 251-256). But, even though responsibility for "Indians and lands reserved for the Indians" was listed as a responsibility of the central government in Section 29 of the Quebec Resolutions (p. 468), there is very little reference to it in the debates of the provinces of central and eastern Canada. Does this reflect the reality of the debates, or the bias of the excerpting process? The editors do not say.

In that same Section 29, the Quebec Resolutions provided that "the general parliament shall have power to make laws for the peace, welfare, and good government of the federated provinces" (p. 467). Note the use of "welfare." When and why did this become "peace, order and good government," the residual clause of the British North America Act of 1867, and cliched descriptor of Canadian difference from the Americans, whose pet phrase is "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"? Surely this mystery deserves the editors' attention. Welfare and order are hardly synonyms. Would, for example, "peace, welfare and good government" have made the Privy Council justices more amenable to the constitutionality of R. B. Bennett's New Deal legislation in the 1930s?

In their bibliographical essay at the end of the book (appendix C), the editors note a number of key factors that have altered Canadian politics since the 1860s. Among these are "the expansion of the franchise, the development of new parties and extra-parliamentary organizations in all parties, the proliferation of political interest groups, staggering advances in material wealth, and ... the growth of the regulatory and welfare state, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982), 'executive federalism' (government by First Ministers' conferences) and the phenomenon of 'globalization' " (p. 481). To this list they might well add three further items: the rise of the mass electronic media with its more confrontational and "show-biz" style of journalism; the ubiquitous presence of public-opinion polling and manipulative political advertising; and the marked increase in party discipline, with its vast impact on the power of the prime minister. Still, the editors are correct to note that in spite of great changes, much remains the same.

This is both an informative and an entertaining book for anyone with even a little interest in the political ideas of Canadians at the time of Confederation. It deserves a much wider readership than it is likely to get. Making its existence better known to university professors and secondary-school teachers of Canadian history and politics would be a good first step in alleviating Canadians' sometimes abysmal ignorance of their political roots.

Note

[1]. The two out-of-print books in the Carleton Library series are P. B. Waite, *The Confederation Debates in the Province of Canada, 1865* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1963); and G. P. Browne, *Documents on the Confederation of British North America* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969).

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