

Donald Wright
Donald Creighton: A Life in History

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. 472 pp.

William Westfall

York University

Donald Grant Creighton wrote Canadian history in the grand romantic tradition—literate, heroic, and inspirational. He imagined a Canada that was northern, British, and non-American, and, by writing its history, he tried to make such a nation real. And yet at the end of a life distinguished by a dozen important books and numerous honours, he feared he would be remembered “if at all” as “a pessimist, a reactionary, and a violent Tory partisan” (8). It is the interplay between Creighton, the great Canadian historian, and *Donald Wright*, the deeply troubled, melancholic, and unrepentant defender of his faith, that sustains Donald Wright’s fine biography.

The subtitle, “A Life in History,” has a double meaning. “His work,” Wright asserts, “cannot be fully understood without also understanding him and the time in which he lived. But what can be said of him cannot be said of all historians: the time in which he lived can be fully understood only if we understand his life and work” (10). No easy task: Wright must not only explain how the world shaped his character and craft, he must also show how Creighton had a formative impact on that same world. The first claim is very well sustained; the second is more problematic.

Creighton was born into a tightly knit and deeply religious family. His father, a Methodist minister, was the editor of the *Christian Guardian*. Happy, outgoing, and precocious young Donald feasted on a steady diet of popular and cultivated literature. He entered Victoria College with a good knowledge of English literature and history, a sharp and competitive intelligence, and a sense of self-confidence bordering on arrogance. Although math was a problem, he excelled in history and literature. He was a major figure on campus. At graduation, he narrowly lost out on a Rhodes scholarship but was awarded a fellowship at Balliol. He saw before him a brilliant career performed on an imperial stage. However, a most happy calamity befell this life plan. In a tale worthy of the most heart-felt romance, he fell in love with Luella Bruce, an attractive, strong-willed, and creative young woman. Accommodations were made.

They would be married in London as soon as she had her degree, and she would live in Paris while he completed his studies at Oxford. The book ends with a picture of their grave markers nestled together in the small Anglican cemetery near Brooklin, Ontario. The author's sensitive treatment of their long and committed relationship alone makes the book worth reading.

Creighton had few close colleagues at the University of Toronto (Harold Innis was the great exception); he was vulnerable to slights both real and imagined; and he never believed his genius was adequately acknowledged by his department or university. All the while he was consumed by his artistic life and the writing of books gave him enormous pleasure. His scholarly success led in turn to fellowships, release time, and more publications. Ironically, in the light of his disdain for everything American, most of these fellowships were awarded by American endowments. Financial pressures were a persistent concern. He enjoyed large sums of cultural capital, but the salary he earned made it very difficult to keep up such a position. For most of their lives, the Creightons lived in rented accommodation and did not acquire their own house (a cottage in a small village) until he was close to retirement.

The Laurentian thesis underscores almost all of Creighton's major works—*The Commercial Empire of the St Lawrence*, the two-volume biography of John A. Macdonald, and *Canada's First Century*—and is widely acknowledged as his most important contribution to the writing of Canadian history. Building upon Innis's staples thesis, Creighton asserted that the St. Lawrence River/Great Lakes system served as an inchoate foundation of nationhood. And the story of the building of a northern and British dominion assumed in his skillful hands truly epic dimensions. He recalled the moment he first perceived this vision of Canada as if it were an evangelical conversion experience. Labouring away in the archives, he was suddenly struck by the same vision of Canada that had inspired the merchants of Montreal and the fathers of Confederation. It was at once a religious awakening and a romantic epiphany: “a moment,” he wrote, “of pure rapture” (114).

For all its grandeur and significance, however, the Laurentian thesis got many things very wrong. Creighton's narrative, Wright emphatically argues, simply erased many important groups, most notably the Aboriginal peoples who just happened to already occupy this “great lone land.” Nor is there much room in the Creightonian canon for women, French Canadians, or members of the emerging working class. His thesis was also, like the Protestant Bible, a decidedly teleological construction. The end of the story—the Canadian nation state—was prefigured in the beginning, embedded in the Great River and Laurentian Shield. It fell to the businessmen and politicians to bring the course of history to its proper and predetermined conclusion.

The final section of the biography, “Winter,” is at once provocative and compelling, and the interplay between scholarship and depression takes a new turn. By the mid-1960s, Creighton was becoming increasingly distraught and upon his life and work grim melancholy sat. He now asserted that the Empire of the St Lawrence had failed and that “he had wasted his time writing the history of an ungrateful country” (296). He translated this sense of gloom into his great book, *Canada's First Century*,

in which he turned the story of Canada on its head. The epic saga of nation-building had become a tragedy. Canada's first century would be its last.

Creighton retired in 1971 (I was a member of his last graduate seminar); but the old chieftain did not fade away. Indeed, he now became a very public figure. Apocalyptic visions of Canada's imminent demise proved to be exceptionally popular. *Canada's First Century* was a runaway bestseller, and literary success led in turn to prime time television interviews, film documentaries, and major speaking engagements. Journalists sought out his opinions on the most important questions of the day, and his diatribes against biculturalism and Quebec independence made front page copy. The stronger (and more controversial) his views became, the larger his audience grew and the louder it applauded. If the country had not listened to the biographer of Macdonald, it could not get enough from the prophet of Canada's demise.

In 1976 doctors found cancer in Creighton's colon. It was not a good year. His last scholarly book, *The Forked Road: Canada, 1939–1957*, was a critical failure and the novel he wrote about the takeover of a Canadian whisky distillery did not go down well. He also sensed that old friends and former students were turning against him. He died in his own home on December 19, 1979. His passing was announced on the national news. His death had made history.

To what extent did Creighton's life, as the author claims, have an impact on the history of Canada; how does understanding his life and work help us to understand more fully "the time in which he lived?" Without an epilogue, the reader is left to draw out Wright's answers from the text. Clearly Creighton had an important impact on the study of Canadian history. When he joined the department of history at the University of Toronto, Canadian history was at best a footnote to American and British history. Creighton (and Maurice Careless) changed that and, by the time he retired, Canadian history was the largest field in the curriculum, staffed by a phalanx of full-time and productive professors. Secondly, his scholarship shaped the way Canadians saw Canada. Pierre Berton's popular history of the CPR, for example, drew heavily (without sufficient acknowledgement) upon Creighton's account of national formation. In the academy, national political history would give way to social history (race, class, gender, and religion) and Creighton's version of the Canadian identity had to compete with a myriad of other identities in the new arena of Canadian identity politics. But altogether Creighton's construction of Canada enjoyed a very good innings.

In a very fitting homage to Creighton the artist and the historian, Wright skillfully inserts below the title of each chapter a short quotation from Creighton's life of Macdonald and at the start of the final chapter he quotes Creighton's beautifully crafted and poignant description of Macdonald's death: "He was borne on and outward, past care and planning, past England and Canada, past life and into death" (329). He then repeats these words only slightly amended at the very moment of Creighton's own passing: "he was going now, past words and books, past England and Canada, past life and into death" (344). Wright very self-consciously places his own biography within the romantic conventions of Creightonian history and romantic art, very appropriately joining together these two heroes. The great Canadian historian created the first hero; his biographer has created the second.