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BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

Michael Bliss

Writing History: A Professor's Life

Toronto: Dundurn, 2011. 428 pp.

E.R. Forbes

The Education of an Innocent: An Autobiography

Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 2012. 142 pp.

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If historians make lousy novelists—think of Lionel Groulx's *L'appel de la race* and Donald Creighton's *Takeover*—they make not bad autobiographers. In *History, Historians, and Autobiography*, Jeremy Popkin observes that historians turn to autobiography as a way of making sense of the past in narrative form. Of course, their autobiographies aren't history, but they aren't autobiographies either. Instead, they occupy a borderland between the two genres because historians are uniquely able to draw on the historical big picture.

By his own admission, Michael Bliss has not lived a 'particularly exciting or even colourful' life (11) while Ernie Forbes simply wanted to recreate for his children 'a narrow slice' of his personal experience (14). So what compelled them to publish their autobiographies? For Bliss, it was the conviction that 'there was enough substance to my life to make it not without interest to readers who wonder about what it was like to be a university professor in North America in the last half of the twentieth century' (12). For Forbes, it was the sense that others might 'happen to be interested' in his life story (14). These opening justifications signal an important difference between the two men and their respective books: where Bliss is confident, Forbes is modest, and where *Writing History* is lengthy and ambitious, *The Education of an Innocent* is slim and unassuming.

Bliss' earliest and most 'vivid' memory is of him crying himself to sleep. The exact circumstances are forgotten, but the memory isn't. Nor is the symbolism 'of being deprived, starved, [and] desperately hungry for mother's love.' Although his mother

could be 'warm and comforting,' she was an unhappy and unfulfilled woman who rationed her love, serving it for good behaviour and withholding it for bad behaviour (16). Meanwhile, Bliss' father was Doc Bliss, the town doctor. Everyone knew and respected him, but he too was unhappy and unfulfilled, believing that he should have been a scholar and medical researcher. Despite its flaws, the Bliss family was functional and it emphasized the middle class values of education, hard work, delayed gratification, and deference to traditional forms of authority. Summers spent at the Taylor Statten Camps also instilled in a young Bliss a willingness to push himself physically, a unique capacity to stick it out, and a desire to win. Never a place for weaklings, it's not an accident that Ahmek's evening hymn invokes 'The spirit of Ahmek, maker of men.'

A gifted student, Bliss attended the University of Toronto, initially in Math, Physics, and Chemistry or MPC. It wasn't for him. Next, he studied for the ministry. But his doubt began to grow until finally, during a long shower in the autumn of 1961, his faith went down the drain and he became a life-long skeptic. As is so often the case, it was a particular professor that allowed him to see himself in a new light. Because Ken McNaught 'convinced us that history was the key to understanding our world' and because 'he challenged us to vigorously attack conventional wisdom,' 'I began to think that if I had any future in an intellectual pursuit it would be in history' (97). After three years of teaching high school history, Bliss decided to pursue graduate studies, also at Varsity, and the rest is, well, history.

Blessed with a prodigious brain and vast reserves of energy, Bliss edited a collection of primary documents, taught at Harvard, had an article accepted for publication in the *Canadian Historical Review*, and was invited to join the faculty in 1968, all before he had finished his dissertation. When he retired 38 years later, he had written 11 books, over 30 articles, and countless book reviews, short essays, and op-eds. Once he hit his stride, he could maintain a grueling pace of 2 000 to 4 000 words a day, or about a chapter a month. As a long-distance runner, he learned to keep his eyes focused on a more distant horizon and, as a productive scholar, he nursed an open disdain for his colleagues who treated their summers like vacations and their sabbaticals like trial retirements.

Describing himself as 'temperamentally inclined to be a good hater' (192), Bliss knew that he was never 'never going to be a model camper or a team player among the professoriate' (257). He also knew that he possessed an 'aggressive, competitive, [and] occasionally mean-spirited edge' (303). That edge, unfortunately, mars what is an otherwise exceptional book bristling with passion for what we do as historians.

His former student, Greg Kealey, 'contained his arrogance and rudeness just short of direct confrontation' (146); a 'fashionably radical' Jill Ker Conway was ill-equipped to manage Toronto's student radicals (154); Michael Katz proved the 'obvious' in *The People of Hamilton, Canada West* (173); and Susan Mann delivered a presidential address to the Canadian Historical Association 'unworthy' of the occasion (296). In fact, Bliss gave up on the CHA, finding its annual meetings 'tedious,' 'irrelevant,' 'cold,' and 'lifeless' (249, 326). Meanwhile, Donald Creighton is used as a convenient target, brought out here and there to score easy points against. When, for example, a

young Bliss once dared to use the staff washroom in Sidney Smith Hall, 'a silent and almost certainly disapproving' Creighton stood at the next urinal (255).

More problematic is Bliss' absolute contempt for the 1960s in general and student radicals and the New Left in particular. God knows, the 1960s and 1970s saw more than their fair share of drug-induced excesses, silly experiments in alternative learning, and empty promises of liberation through dropping out. But the long sixties represented a key historical moment in world history and Bliss is too good a historian to dismiss it altogether as a period of 'moral disorder' (145). And as an early pioneer in social history, he should know that Pierre Trudeau's constitutional revolution—which he admired—came from below as much as it did from above, that it was the product of countless small actions by countless men and women in the 1960s and 1970s who envisioned a more democratic and less deferential political order.

Also problematic is Bliss' unresolved contradiction: he is a Canadian nationalist who brilliantly defended his conception of Canada during the Meech Lake constitutional crisis, *yet* he also hopes that closer economic integration with the United States will lead to closer political integration and, eventually, the disappearance of the border altogether. Because he grew up in a border community, Bliss never succumbed to the neurotic anti-Americanism that infected so many English-Canadian intellectuals. But his hope that the Free Trade Agreement 'would be a step toward eventually erasing the border' (252) is still contradictory, until one remembers that nationalists don't love their country, they hate it for never achieving whatever national dream they had in mind for it.

The best chapters in *Writing History* see Bliss recounting his adventures in historical research, especially the research for *The Discovery of Insulin, Osler, and Cushing*. What drove him to push himself so hard? According to Bliss it was his mother's insistence on the need to prove oneself. Perhaps. But I suspect the answer lies in his earliest memory: even after her death in 1977, he still wanted his mother's love.

Despite his retirement promise to become 'mellow and cuddly,' Bliss can't resist the urge to repeat a forty-year old slight (418). In 1972, he taught a summer course at the University of New Brunswick. Afterwards, he resolved never to teach a summer course again, in part because his course in Canadian history since Confederation attracted only 50 students while 'an utterly tedious course on the Maritimes from 1713 to 1848' attracted some 200 students (142). Only an Upper Canadian could assume that a course in national history should be more interesting to New Brunswick students than a course in regional history.

The desire to dispel the stereotype of Maritime parochialism and conservatism animated Ernie Forbes' career. As a much-loved and much-respected historian, he understood that, as a category of analysis, the nation couldn't explain the historical experience of Atlantic Canada, and, to this end, he presided over a renaissance in the writing of regional history from his UNB office. 'While any historian can expect to confront myths and stereotypes,' he wrote in *Challenging the Regional Stereotype*, 'seldom does one encounter so comprehensive, integrated and consistent a group of largely false myths as those which yielded the composite image of Maritime conservatism in the 20th century' (7).

The Education of an Innocent begins at the beginning, with Forbes' extended family on both his father's and mother's side. The purpose isn't simply genealogical, it's also a reminder that 'the family as an economic unit' was essential to survival in the rural, hard-scrabble Maritimes (20). As a United Church minister, Forbes' father moved often, to churches in Gagetown, New Brunswick, New Carlisle, Quebec, Baddeck Forks, Cape Breton, and Caledonia, Nova Scotia. Moving as often as he did, Forbes developed an easy ability to make friends and an early passion for fishing in the region's many different streams and rivers.

Although there was never a lot of money, Forbes' parents taught him the importance of hard work, the value of an education, and the expectation of doing one's best. They also taught him the importance of family, that when the going gets tough, one can always turn to one's family. When, for example, Forbes' mother died and when his brother almost certainly shot himself, he and his father turned to each other. Forbes' had his many friends and his school work while his father had his many parishioners and his church, but they made time for each other every night. A few years later, it was time for Forbes to choose his own path. 'This was particularly hard on Dad,' he wrote (45). But his father rightly understood his son's need to explore wider horizons and to have access to a university library. A little over a year later, an 18-year old Forbes was forced to move his ailing father to a Sackville, New Brunswick nursing home because that is what families do.

Forbes concedes that he wasn't Mount A's most brilliant student but he worked hard, joined the debating society, and got decent grades. He also fell in love and was married shortly after graduation. After teaching high school for a couple of years, he decided to give graduate school a shot, entering Dalhousie in 1964. In those days, there were almost as many openings as there were graduate students, and he was offered an instructor position at the University of Victoria even before he had completed his MA thesis on the Nova Scotia Conservative Party. Apparently, the department head liked the fact that he had a brush cut, that he was not one of the long-haired types that were beginning to make their presence known on North America's many campuses. Forbes' growing conviction that a regional approach to Canadian history made more sense than a national approach was confirmed by a new friendship with Pat Roy, who was asking similar questions about British Columbia.

On one occasion, he had the chance to share the stage with two Toronto PhD students, Michael Bliss and Viv Nelles, who were also in Victoria. Arguing that 'there were rational reasons for Maritimers to feel hard done by in Confederation,' Forbes was cut off by a representative from the Canada Council who didn't appreciate his 'whining.' He wanted to hide under the table, but was compelled to rejoin the fray by the anti-Maritime jokes from 'the Toronto boys' (70). Afterwards, Forbes was convinced that he needed to do a PhD on the topic of the Maritimes in Confederation, specifically the Maritime Rights movement in the 1920s.

After completing his PhD at Queen's, Forbes could have stayed at U Vic, but he accepted a position at UNB instead. British Columbia was wonderful, he said, but it was never going to be home and so, with two kids, he and his wife moved to Fredericton in 1974. The timing was perfect. With a handful of other dedicated

scholars—including Bill Acheson, Phil Buckner, and Bernie Vigod—Forbes undertook the re-writing of Atlantic-Canadian history along new and exciting lines in *Acadiensis*, one of the best academic journals in the country, and in his books, especially *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, edited with his friend and cribbage partner, Del Muisse.

But life at UNB wasn't easy and money was always tight. Even the library committee became a hornets' nest and, as a member, Forbes found himself dealing with strong personalities and imagined grievances. It was too much. After one bruising meeting, his wife found him 'crying in the men's washroom' (95). Lacking the necessary guile, Forbes was never going to be a university administrator. He was, first and foremost, a scholar and a gentleman.

Because he wrote his autobiography for his children, Forbes doesn't investigate the writing of history in much detail, nor does he discuss university governance, graduate teaching, or even his selected theme of innocence. Instead, he quietly emphasizes the importance of extended family networks, community ties, religious faith, and personal humility.

If *Writing History* is about the writing of history in English Canada in the second half of the twentieth century, *The Education of an Innocent* gives us a window into a disappearing rural world where people may not have had much, but at least they had each other.