

Alex MacKinnon

### LITERARY CONVERSATIONS

- Conversations with Canadian Novelists.* By Donald Cameron. Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1973. Pp. 320 \$11.95.
- Eleven Canadian Novelists.* By Graeme Gibson. Toronto: House of Anansi, 1973. Pp. 324 \$10.50.
- The Writer's Voice: Conversations with Contemporary Writers.* By John Graham and George Garrett. New York: William Morrow & Company, 1973. Pp. xv, 29. \$3.50.

The books listed above, two Canadian and one American, are collections of taped and edited interviews. The publication this spring of three such books focuses attention on the interview as a by-product of literature. Question and answer sessions with poets, dramatists, and novelists became popular this century mainly because of *The Paris Review*, which for some years has had an interview in every issue (the current number has the forty-seventh of its "The Art of Fiction" series, with Linda Kuehl questioning Eudora Welty). In the present case, all three collections offer such interesting reading that they are worth having for that reason alone. They contain a minimum of literary gossip--that occupational hazard of the interviewer. Cameron's *Conversations* includes a most welcome professional touch, a page of biographical and bibliographical information for each novelist interviewed. Both Canadian books have photographs of the writers, Gibson doing his own camera work and Cameron using already familiar publicity photos.

Collections of interviews are not, obviously, to be ranked with creative works, yet by their nature and origin they have an interest potential which no biographical or critical study can offer. Although it is likely that we will now see a spate of articles derived from these books, it is not easy to assess the worth of interviews as an aid to literary study. They are without doubt of some value as sources of information about writing and writers, about aims, opinions, methods of work and plans for the future: and often their "horse's mouth" comment is the only really authoritative statement available to help with the interpretation of a particular work. Strictly, they are neither primary nor secondary sources, but when they deal quietly and seriously with careers, works, and problems of writing, as do these three books, they provide excellent reading and insights or leads elsewhere unavailable. These factors alone make their worth unquestionable, without our trying to determine more precisely the degree of that worth. No one should hesitate to include them in supplementary reading lists for students.

Cameron's twenty novelists overlap with Gibson's eleven in five cases: both books have interviews with Margaret Laurence, David Godfrey, Jack Ludwig, Timothy Findley and Mordecai Richler. Gibson offers Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro to counter Cameron's Robertson Davies and Brian Moore, but Cameron also talked with Hugh MacLennan, Morley Callaghan, and W. O. Mitchell--to round off the "big names". Marian Engel, Matt Cohen, Austin Clarke and Scott Symons comprise Gibson's other interviewees. Cameron's others are Ernest Buckler, Roch Carrier, Harold Horwood, George Bowering, Robert Kroetsch, Martin Myers, David Lewis Stein, Thomas Raddall, Gabrielle Roy and Rudy Wiebe. In all twenty-six Canadian novelists gave time and careful attention to questions about themselves, their art, and writing in general. Readers wanting to know more about the processes of fiction writing will find in these books many answers to their questions.

The Canadians, Cameron and Gibson, approach their work as interviewers in somewhat different ways. The former, a professor of literature at University of New Brunswick, did his homework thoroughly; it is evident that he made himself familiar with the works

of his twenty novelists. His questions vary as much as do the personalities of the writers he talked with. Gibson, a novelist himself (*Five Legs*, 1969, and *Communion*, 1971), seems to have met with whatever writers became available. He found that he "tended to repeat certain key questions about writing as a pursuit", and he was "constantly being surprised at the variety of the answers". It is possible to spend enjoyable hours with *Eleven Canadian Novelists* reading the repeated questions one at a time to compare the eleven answers.

*Conversations* makes more of the relationship of the interviewer and the novelist. Cameron carefully set up taping sessions to ensure an atmosphere conducive to free and relaxed talk. He prefaces each exchange with a brief account of the time, place and other circumstances of the meeting and with some comment on the personalities of the writers. Here he follows the *Paris Review* format, long a model for similar reports in scholarly and popular periodicals. Sometimes reporter-questioners talk so much about themselves and their arranging and conducting of the interview that the writer and his ideas are all but smothered in the trivia. Cameron largely avoids these excesses. If at times he seems to forget his own "basic rule of all good interviews: when in doubt shut your mouth and really listen", it is when his advance preparation over-asserts itself in the questioning or when he makes too much of his personal relationship with the writer (a fault embarrassingly pervasive in the Graham and Garrett book). For the most part, though, the relaxed dialogue and variety of topics justify the book's title: Cameron allows us to listen to intelligent and informative conversation.

The questions Graeme Gibson works into each interview are a clear indication of the kind of discussion he promoted: What is the novelist's role, his responsibility to society? Do writers know something special? For whom do you write? What do you like best, and least, about your own work? Does writing demand a special kind of selfishness? Gibson's interview with David Godfrey typifies his approach and how it differs from Cameron's. Together Gibson and Godfrey explore the novelist's compulsions, why he sometimes forsakes writing, what a writer's role is and could be in particular social contexts. Though both interviews make much of a Godfrey short story

"The Hard-Headed Collector", Cameron tends to concentrate more on the works, especially on *The New Ancestors*, on Godfrey's connections with House of Anansi and New Press, and on future plans (Godfrey, incredibly, may one day produce his own version of a *Jalna* series: "I'm working on a chain of about five or six Canadian novels which will go way back in time and will be set all across the country, different parts and different times--with a vague, immense family tree worked out"). Novelist Gibson questions from within the context of the writing process and the writer's life: the problems, the personal aspirations and satisfactions of the novelist concern him intensely. Professor Cameron tends to the objective, external question, at times almost the classroom approach. The two books thereby complement each other: they are not redundant even while dealing with the same novelist.

It is interesting to note that both Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence insist that a novelist should write out of his personal experience, out of the experienced realities of one's own life, not from imagined or second-hand sources. Godfrey regrets the longtime tendency of Canadians to look beyond Canada for topics and inspiration, their inability to see what lay around them, thereby delaying the development of a Canadian identity in our literature. Hugh MacLennan continues to be patient with critics who see him as a chronicler of twentieth-century Canadian times rather than a novelist; he inevitably repeats ideas familiar from his essays, but his kindness and urbanity make him an excellent subject for an interview. Some of Morley Callaghan's remarks about excellence and modern writers are embarrassingly self-promoting; age and critical neglect seem to be pushing him into the role of Canada's literary curmudgeon. Mordecai Richler must be hard to interview; he seems somewhat indifferent to the process. Some of the younger novelists are too eager to offer interpretations of their works, to note what reviewers and critics missed.

It is to be regretted that no one managed to interview Sinclair Ross, Hugh Hood, Ethel Wilson and Gwethalyn Graham; and Sheila Watson and Leonard Cohen have written novels which have attracted enough interest and comment to assure that what they would say

would be interesting indeed. There are others too, so perhaps another collection of interviews may be forthcoming. The Cameron and Gibson collections are but the latest indices of the burgeoning "literary nationalism" now evident in Canada. Canadian writers are being publicly noticed at home on a scale unheard of until recently. Professor Robin Matthews of Carleton University calls for more of the same. Novelist Mordecai Richler fears it will lead to a wholesale over-evaluation of second-rate writers and works merely because they are Canadian. Emotionally, I agree entirely with Matthews; rationally I can appreciate Richler's warnings. But as we know well from British literary history, time has a way of levelling out the excesses of any age. In the meantime it would be a definite loss if publishers were to take seriously the naysayings of the Richlers and we were to be deprived of the useful information and enjoyable reading of these books of interviews.

*The Writer's Voice: Conversations with Contemporary Writers* resulted from a "Conference of Creative Writers and Cinema" at Hollins College. John Graham of the University of Virginia arranged dialogue with eighteen writers and the interviews were edited (again with *Paris Review* type introductory comment) by George Garrett, a novelist. Of the eighteen, only Brian Moore, poet Richard Wilbur, novelist Ralph Ellison, and poet-novelist James Dickey are well known in Canada. William Manchester, who has written four novels, is better known for his controversial *Death of a President* (1967).

Possibly because he had to keep things moving for his radio program, *The Scholar's Bookshelf*, Graham talks almost as much as do his writers. The resulting interviews tend to be merely chatty; though some, notably those with Brian Moore, Dickey, and Ellison are as interesting as any in Gibson or Cameron. Mr. Moore is an excellent subject, forthright and unpretentious; in three interviews with him that I've seen, he is quietly informative about his novels, work habits, and the career and influences that have shaped him. These interviews are excellent introductions to his fiction.

*The Writer's Voice*, however, including Garrett's introductions, has a slight overdose of first name familiarity and of the "we are all such

wonderful people” tone now unhappily familiar in TV get-togethers in both Canada and the United States. Nevertheless, when questioning sticks to the basics of writing and influences on writing or introduces interpretations of particular works, Graham’s interviews offer information and insights well worth pondering (one is tempted to assert that poets are not as articulate or explicit as novelists, at least not in interviews). On the whole, though, the greater objectivity of Cameron and Gibson serve their writers better. If now we could be fully assured that interviews are a positive means of increasing interest in and appreciation of literature, then the value of these three books would be beyond argument.



## REVIEW ARTICLE

*Phillip A. Buchner*

*Towards The Discovery of Canada: Selected Essays.* By Donald Creighton. Toronto; Macmillan Company of Canada Limited, 1972. Pp. 315. Paper \$6.95. Cloth \$11.95.

Probably no historian has had a greater impact upon the study of Canadian history than Donald Creighton, and the appearance of a collection of his essays is a welcome event. Although only three of the eighteen essays have not been published previously, many originally appeared in journals not readily accessible and Creighton has written a very revealing introduction to the collection. Moreover, by bringing together a cross-section of Creighton's essays written from the 1930's to the early 1970's, the book allows the reader to trace the growth and development of one of Canada's great, perhaps its greatest, historian. For this reason it is unfortunate that Creighton, in spite of his belief that "events should be put down, in the main, as they occur in time" (p.24), decided to divide the essays into four artificial sections instead of presenting them chronologically, in the same order in which he wrote them.

The three earliest essays were written in the 1930's. Two of the three, "The Commercial Class in Canadian Politics, 1792-1840" and "The Economic Background of the Rebellions of 1837", were preliminary reports on the research that was to culminate in *The Empire of the St. Lawrence*. These articles show clearly that Creighton was not immune to the environmentalism that was current in the post-World War I era and that he had more in common with exponents of the frontier thesis and the liberal historians of the period than he was prepared to admit later. Would not J. W. Daffoe, whom Creighton

was later to condemn for writing a book entitled *Canada: An American Nation* and omitting the word "North" (p. 206), and "that eminent scholar Dr. Oscar Douglas Skelton, Ph.D." (p. 201) have agreed that the struggle between France and England in North America was "also a conflict between two purely American societies" (p. 84) or that "the great issues in Canada, as in all America, were not to be decided by imperialistic virtues and vices; they were to be decided by American capacities and by the prompting of the American spirit" (pp. 84-85). What frontierist could not have enthusiastically endorsed Creighton's claim that "The most important products of the New World were its new men. The French, like the Spaniards, Dutch, British, and Germans crossed the Atlantic Ocean as Europeans; but they and their descendants remained in the new continent as Americans" (p. 85). Few historians could now accept the degree of economic determinism in these early articles or Creighton's claim that "the rebellions of 1837 were simply the final expression of the conflict between agrarianism and commercialism, between feudal and frontier agriculture and the commercial state" (p. 119), but these articles can still be read with considerable advantage. So too can "Victorians and the Empire", although most imperial historians would now feel that Creighton overstressed the anti-imperialism of the mid-Victorian period and oversimplified the complex motives of Victorian statesmen. Implicit in the article was a highly critical and almost cynical assessment of British policy toward her colonies, an assessment quite in keeping with the anti-imperial mood of Canadians in the interwar years.

In the 1940's the emphasis of Creighton's work began to change. His work for the Rowell-Sirois Commission led to one of his most significant articles, "Economic Nationalism and Confederation", in which Creighton traced the economic pressures that led to the introduction of the protective tariff, which Creighton with his centralist interpretation of Canadian history saw as the completion of a "program of national unification" (p. 136). This period also saw the beginnings of the interest that was to consume the next two decades of Creighton's life. "George Brown, Sir John Macdonald and the 'Workingman'" initiated Creighton's effort to give Macdonald his proper place in Canadian historiography.



What a writer omits to include in a selection of his essays is perhaps as revealing as what he does include. It is rather unfortunate, but not altogether surprising, that Creighton chose to exclude from this collection two interesting essays he published in the early 1940's. Perhaps he does not wish to be reminded that in "The Course of Canadian Democracy", published in the *University of Toronto Quarterly* in 1942, he declared that "we have no really quotable theorists of our own. Perhaps the most promising candidate is William Lyon Mackenzie, who devised a rather interesting combination of Jeffersonian democracy and Benthamism" and that the Fathers of Confederation copied British usages "almost too slavishly". Undoubtedly he would prefer that "Canada in the English-Speaking World", a paper delivered before the American Historical Association in 1944 and published in the *Canadian Historical Review* in 1945, be buried and forgotten. In it he announced:

Yet, though it emphatically desired to be separate, Canada was certain to become culturally as well as physically a part of the North American continent. Inevitably the Dominion grew up in terms of certain continental relationships, interests, attitudes, and values; and, as time went on, it acquired an increasingly strong sense of the unity of North America - an increasingly warm feeling of friendship with its nearest neighbour, the great Republic. For Canada friendship with the United States [sic] is the first essential of existence and the first instinct of nature. In the past, British North America has successfully defended itself against the young Republic; but the time has long gone by since Canadian statesmen first accepted the fact that it could do so no longer. There can be no balance of power in North America. The defeat of the Confederate States destroyed the last possibility of a political equilibrium; and the politics of this continent must be frankly based upon the political, military, and economic preponderance of the United States. Gradually the conventions appropriate to such a situation - the rules of the political game in North America - were accepted by the nations both great and small. The United States ceased its unnecessary threats of force; the Dominion of Canada grew beyond a certain adolescent irresponsibility.

Creighton even ended his paper with a long quotation from Mackenzie King.

Not until the late 1940's and early 1950's did Creighton begin to take a really critical view of Canada's relationship with the United States and "the Liberal interpretation of Canadian history" (p. 200). In 1948 in "Macdonald and Canadian Historians" he began his attack on "the rather simple-minded environmentalism of the past twenty-five years" (p. 209) and "the strong partisan tone of a good deal of

Canadian historical writing" (p. 200). In 1954 he delivered a paper, published here for the first time, at the Couchiching Conference on "Canada and the Cold War", a strong and very reasonable critique of American foreign policy which met, Creighton informs us, with a chilling response from the honorary President of the Couchiching Institute, John G. Diefenbaker, who found it "a very extraordinary statement for a 'Conservative historian' to make" (p. 9). The speech apparently aroused considerable discussion in the press and Creighton, never comfortable in a public debate, retreated into his academic shell. He did however continue his attack upon "the Authorized Version" (p. 343) of Canadian history in three articles published in 1956 and 1957. Whereas in his 1945 paper Creighton had praised the creation of the Permanent Joint Board on Defence and the "instinctive unanimity" that act had symbolized, in 1957 he criticized the Canadian government for agreeing to its creation: "Canada, like a dutiful child that has learned to like what its parents think good for it, had actually accepted American continentalism" (p. 40). Creighton greeted the defeat of the Liberal federal government with such enthusiasm in 1957 that it is hardly surprising that Diefenbaker and many others believed him to be a Conservative. Creighton believed that "the impregnable rock of the authorized version" (p. 34) had been shaken and that the danger of continentalism would bring Canadians back "with interest and with almost the excitement of rediscovery to Sir John Macdonald" (p. 227).

After 1957 Creighton's optimism began to change to pessimism. The united front against American cultural penetration was broken by the rising tide of French Canadian nationalism after 1960. In "The Use and Abuse of History", and "The Myth of Biculturalism", both published in 1966, Creighton denied that the Fathers of Confederation had intended to create a bicultural Canada. In 1941 he had hailed the Rowell-Sirois Commissioners as the "new Fathers of Confederation", but he was not prepared to allow the members of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism "to regard themselves as the Stepfathers of Confederation and to assume that their terms of reference empower them to propose fundamental changes in the Canadian Constitution" (p. 82). "The French language has survived in North America," Creighton warned French Canadians, "for one reason only: Canada has survived. The Fathers of Confederation

reached a settlement which gave the French language the best chance it will ever have on this continent. And if we try to improve on that settlement, we do so at our own peril" (p. 270). In the next few years Creighton, Cassandra-like, repeatedly issued his warnings against the twin dangers of continentalism and French Canadian nationalism and his essays became even more polemical. Interestingly, few of the papers he delivered in this period are included in the bibliography of his "academic" writings in his *festschrift*, *Character and Circumstance* (no credit is given for the compilation of the list but it would be interesting to know whether Creighton himself compiled or approved it). Only one of his essays during these years, "History and Literature", published now for the first time, does not reflect Creighton's obsession. It is an unassuming explanation of Creighton's personal philosophy of history and the influences that helped to shape his peculiar style of historical writing. It is surely interesting to learn that, as one might have expected, Creighton's favourite writers are the French novelists, Balzac, Zola, Proust and Jules Romains, and his favourite composer, Richard Wagner. More characteristic of Creighton's mood is his address to the Canadian Historical Association in 1969 (a far cry from his Presidential Address of 1957 which is also republished here), "The Decline and Fall of the Empire of the St. Lawrence", and his hitherto unpublished submission of 1971 to the Special Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons on the Constitution, which declares that "Canada has lost its sense of unity and purpose, and with these it has lost its creative powers" (p. 305)

Pessimism and a streak of bitterness are the dominant characteristics of these latter-day essays. In his Introduction Creighton not only reiterates his familiar criticisms of "the Liberal editors, professors and deputy-ministers who set the standards of Canadian historical writing in the early twentieth century" (p.4) and Mackenzie King and the Liberal party for transferring Canada "from the British to the American Empire" and making "the satisfaction of French Canada its chief obsession" (p. 11), but vents his sarcasm on all those who refuse to see the danger which faces Canada: the mass media with "endless time and space for bilingualism and biculturalism" (p. 12); Ramsay Cook, who "began to explore the complexities of the 'French-Canadian Question' with the same earnest application that Dawson, Skelton, and Chester Martin had once devoted to the growth

of responsible government and 'Dominion status'" (p. 12); the "top brass" of the University of Toronto who "showed signs of frigid disapproval" (p. 13) during one of Creighton's lectures. Even W.L. Morton, who shares many of Creighton's views, is criticized for misunderstanding Creighton's position. Perhaps symptomatic of Creighton's mood is his inclusion of a rather bitter anecdote about his relationship with the late Lester Pearson. As Ramsay Cook declared a few years ago, "there is much sadness in the sight of a great historian fallen into such depths of despair."

It would, of course, be both inaccurate and unfair to assess such a great historian solely on the basis of his essays. The essay is not the literary *genre* in which Creighton is most comfortable. It is his creative works, his narrative histories, that reveal Creighton at his best. In the more confined space of the essay his interpretations appear too sweeping, his judgements on men and events too one-sided and even partisan, his comments on fellow historians over-simplified. His weaknesses are more apparent than his strengths. The worst of these weaknesses is the dogmatic quality of his later writings. In defending *Canada's Last Century*, in the *Canadian Historical Review*, Roger Graham declared that "there is no pure reason, no absolute and final truth about history, only at last a personal, individual judgement." No doubt. But is not Creighton's weakness his increasing refusal to consider the "personal individual" judgements of others as having equal validity to his own? Has not Creighton become as dogmatic and as obsessed with present concerns as any Whig historian he has criticized in the past? What this collection of essays reveals is that Creighton has become both dogmatic and bitter. But then no one is ever more bitter than the unheeded prophet of despair.