

Editorial

The jumbled confluence of elections in Canada and the United States, the continuing project to digitize the archive of *The Dalhousie Review*, and the task of writing this latest editorial has put me in mind of something Robert M. Pirsig says in his Afterword to *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Pirsig writes that the Ancient Greek view of time was of “the future as something that came upon them from behind their backs with the past receding away before their eyes. When you think about it, that’s a more accurate metaphor than our present one. Who really can face the future? All you can do is project from the past, even when the past shows that such projections are often wrong. And who really can forget the past? What else is there to know?”

There is something intuitively right about this image of the past and the future as a reversal of the conventional ways we tend to think about them today. We couldn’t be surprised by the future if we could clearly see it coming; whereas the recession of the past out in front of us captures that sense of longing that thoughts of the past often inspire, since we convince ourselves of how clearly we can still see it.

That my words at the beginning of each issue serve as minor snapshots of the times that produce them is an obvious point. More interesting, though, is a series of articles that appeared in *The Dalhousie Review* from its first issue—April 1921—through to the October 1947 issue, articles called “Topics of the Day.” These pieces, many written by a J.A. Stevenson, represent themselves as self-conscious records of the questions and issues surrounding the publication of the latest number of the *Review*. The last of these articles registers several interesting character traits worth considering at our moment in history. Stevenson is discussing questions of population within the British Empire and within Great Britain itself, and notes: “To-day all the Dominions are in the same boat as Canada—their populations remain too small to make fully profitable use of the extensive physical equipment that they have provided for themselves.” He goes on to point out that Britain has the exact opposite problem: “To-day the aggravation of her economic enfeeblement by the late war had made her basic problem truly desperate, and there are authoritative experts who believe that it could only become manageable, if either through the operation of a declining birthrate or by emigration it could be reduced to about 35 millions.” These

words are especially telling of the time in which they were written because of how they register Canada's understandably umbilical relationship with Britain in the years immediately following the war. (How often does one hear of Canada referred to unselfconsciously as a "dominion" these days, anyway?) Our contemporary relationship with the United States finds us looking more to this side of the Atlantic rather than the other, and this change in Canadian viewpoint marks the rise of the United States as world power since World War II. None of this is news, of course, except to say how stark the change is when one goes back to a sixty-year-old document and sees the old relationship referred to in the present tense. Who knows: when the future sneaks up behind us sixty years hence, whom Canada will be looking to then, unless, of course, it is Canada being looked to by others.

There is much attention paid in "Topics of the Day" to British elections, and it seems appropriate—with an eye to our future—that we look at the American election just completed on November 4, 2008. For the purpose of history, then, I will say that I expect in the next twenty years or so to start hearing the expression "the Obama generation" or "Obama's children" to describe that group of engaged, ambitious, and inspired young African Americans who took up public service, or business, or teaching at the elementary, secondary, or university levels, or pursued careers in journalism, or medicine, or dentistry as a result of the example set by an extraordinary man at an extraordinary time. It will take some years before we can gauge the full extent of Barack Obama's contribution to his society and to the societies that look to America from outside its borders. I can't see clearly this future coming, but I think I can hear its footsteps approaching from behind us.