

SOCIETY IN TRANSITION:  
FICTION AND CANADIAN SOCIETY  
1890-1940

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The historians Ramsay Cook and Robert Craig Brown have recently suggested that in the years between 1896 and 1921 Canada became "a nation transformed."<sup>1</sup> The two historians have in mind developments which reshaped Canada from a nation of farms and small towns into a predominantly urban culture. This transformation of society inevitably exerted a pressure for change on some of the basic institutions of society and brought about changes in the way individuals understood their relationship to other individuals and to society as a whole. By examining a broad sample of the novels that describe the period from the turn of the century to the start of the Second World War, we can learn a great deal about the nature of the emerging modern society and about the attitudes of those who lived through this important period of transition.

One of the fundamental issues debated by students of Canadian society is whether Canadian society is "liberal" and "progressive" or is "conservative" and "tory." The fiction that describes Canada as it was from 1890 to 1940 pictures a society that visibly transforms itself from a conservative to a liberal culture, a society that moves from a tradition-centred or "British" outlook to an individualist or "American" outlook. As a result there is an important, though neglected, ideological dimension to much Canadian fiction. Many novels depict a conflict between the older notion of society as a mutually sustaining community and the new conception of society as a collection of individual social atoms. In many books set around the turn of the century, versions of the old and new philosophies compete for the allegiance of the characters. Fiction set between the wars often explores the implications of the newly dominant liberal conception of society.

Geographically Canada is part of North America, and Gad Horowitz argues that Canadian values must be seen as fundamentally "North American" or liberal, a part of the Lockean tradition.<sup>2</sup> But Horowitz points out that Canadian society retains a significant strain of conservative thinking — a "tory touch" — which is not found in American society. This does not mean

<sup>1</sup>Robert Craig Brown and Ramsay Cook, *Canada, 1896-1921: A Nation Transformed* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974).

<sup>2</sup>Gad Horowitz, *Canadian Labour in Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968), pp. 1-57.

that Canadian society is dominated by conservative values. Rather, the "tory touch" has significantly affected the manner in which the dominant North American individualism has been experienced by Canadians. The "tory touch" finds its literary expression through what may be called a philosophy of "tory individualism." In opposition to the idea of an individual's absolute freedom to pursue private happiness, Canadian writers have emphasized an individual's responsibility to pursue a morally correct course of action. Canadian writers (*pace* Robin Mathews) have not exalted the community over the individual. But they have made the individual the beleaguered sole guardian of values once endorsed by society and by the churches.

The best portrait of Canadian society actually in the process of transition is presented in Sara Jeanette Duncan's *The Imperialist* (1904).<sup>3</sup> In scene after scene she illustrates how characters who consciously espouse the old conservative values and who profess to admire all things British actually live their lives by the new liberal American standards. In its public professions Elgin is enthusiastically pro-British — more English than the English, to all appearances:

In Canada the twenty-fourth of May was the Queen's birthday. Nobody in Elgin can possibly have forgotten it. . . . Travelled persons, who had spent the anniversary there [in England], were apt to come back with a poor opinion of its celebration in "the old country" . . . A "Bank" holiday, indeed! Here [in Canada] it was a real holiday, that woke you with bells and cannon. . . .

(pp. 12-13)

Canada preserves social distinctions of a nicety that "may not be easily appreciated by people accustomed to the rough and ready standards of a world at the other end of the Grand Trunk" (p. 14) — that is, in the United States. Yet when Canada meets England, in the form of Alfred Hesketh, Esquire, Canada shows itself to have distinctly democratic social attitudes. For example, Hesketh feels a momentary hesitation when he discovers he is to be introduced to a tradesman, Lorne Murchison's father, as an equal (p. 153). Canada, in the form of the electors of rural South Fox, finds Hesketh's speech too full of offensive words like "colony"; moreover, Hesketh makes "too many allusions to the nobility for a community so far removed from its soothing influence" (p. 195). His hearers are not Americans, it is true, but they are nonetheless not Englishmen. They are really "democrats who had never thrown off the monarch — what harm did he do there overseas?" (p. 191). The qualification is significant. If the monarch did interfere, he would soon be gone.

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<sup>3</sup>Page references are to *The Imperialist* (1904; rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1961).

Probably the figure in Duncan's book who is most representative of the Canadian outlook is Octavius Milburn, the President of the Elgin Chamber of Commerce. Mr. Milburn had "inherited the complacent and Conservative political views of a tenderly nourished industry" (p. 52):

His ideal was life in a practical, go-ahead, self-governing colony, far enough from England actually to be disabused of her inherited anachronisms and make your own tariff, near enough politically to keep your securities up by virtue of her production. (p. 51)

Even the ardent imperialist Lorne Murchison finds his loyalty to England is stronger at a distance. He, "with his soul full of free airs and forest depths," is depressed by the pitifully confined open spaces of a London park, which are the best the city can offer its residents for a Sunday outing. He and the other members of his party find that the self-absorption of England and "the cumbrous social machinery, oppressed them with its dull anachronism in a marching world." North Americans have acquired "that new quality in the blood which made them different" from Englishmen (pp. 125-26). Lorne Murchison overcomes the bad impression made by Alfred Hesketh's speech "by the simple expedient of talking business" (p. 195). Later in his campaign he is not so astute. He becomes infatuated with his own imperialist rhetoric. Lorne's imperialism is based on nonmaterialist values. As he tells Dora Milburn:

It's astonishing what we've stuck to her [England] through, but you can't help seeing why — it's for the moral advantage. Way down at the bottom that's what it is. We have the sense to want to get all we can of that sort of thing. They've developed the finest human product there is, the cleanest, the most disinterested, and we want to keep up the relationship — it's important. (p. 98)

Lorne has, as his opponents gleefully notice, put "sentiment in politics," making him a ready target for satire (p. 207). Lorne is told when he is being discarded by his party that he "didn't get rid of that save-the-Empire-or-die scheme" soon enough:

"The popular idea seems to be," said Mr. Farquarson judicially, "that you would not hesitate to put Canada to some material loss, or at least to postpone her development in various important directions, for the sake of imperial connection." (p. 262)

This, in the view of both Canadian political parties, would be an unforgivable sin — to put principles before material advantage. Although Mr. Millburn has often said "that he preferred a fair living under his own flag to a fortune under the Stars and Stripes," his loyalty to Britain does not extend as far as renouncing the known commercial advantage of the National policy for the unknown and problematical benefits of expanded imperial trade. No amount of rhetoric by the Lorne Murchisons (or the Colonel Denisions and George

Parkins) of the country could make his dollars and cents calculations come out any differently:

Mr. Millburn wouldn't say that this preference trade idea, if practicable, might not work out for the benefit of the empire as a whole. That was a thing he didn't pretend to know. But it wouldn't work out for his benefit — that was a thing he did know. (p. 212)

One important social institution which alters with the emergence of an urban society and the decline of conservative values is the family unit. In the nineteenth century the family receives a sympathetic and at times idealized treatment in Canadian fiction. Children are on good terms with their parents and often remain living at home long past adolescence; marriage, which may come quite late, is the orthodox reason for finally quitting the parental roof. Parental opinion weighs heavily with children, and offspring do not lightly go against their parent's wishes in choosing a career or a mate. In the twentieth century city, on the other hand, the family is no longer necessarily the dominant institution in shaping the individual. Novelists often feel no need to inform readers of the family backgrounds of their characters; even if a character is seen in a family setting, the relationship between the protagonist and his parents is not the chief relationship in the book. Characters do not seem to have acquired their values from their families, but from society at large. Only for the young, such as Brian O'Connell in *Who Has Seen the Wind* (1947), is the family a secure and sustaining environment. Adolescents and young men and women inhabit a wider world. When the family remains a strong influence on the growing generation, conflicts usually set in. Sons and daughters leave the farm to seek their fortunes in town or city. The young pursue different goals in life from those that always satisfied their parents. The family comes to be seen not as the source of standards and security, but as the cause of psychological problems, as in the fiction of Mordecai Richler and Margaret Atwood. Circumstances dictated that the family should still remain a strong force on the prairies, however, even after its influence had weakened elsewhere. Life on the prairies, especially before the advent of the automobile, necessarily confined the individual's daily human contacts mainly to members of his own family circle. The prairie families chronicled in Canadian literature are chiefly patriarchies, in which the father rules with the arbitrary authority of the punitive Old Testament God. Ostenso's Caleb Gare and Grove's Abe Spalding are the sternest representatives of this old-fashioned breed. But the prairie patriarch whose fate most clearly reveals the new forces of commerce and progress at work is John Elliot in Grove's *Our Daily Bread* (1928).<sup>1</sup>

John Elliot has a dream "of seeing his children settled about him as the children of the patriarchs of Israel were settled about their fathers" (p. 7). Yet

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<sup>1</sup>Page references are to *Our Daily Bread* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1928).

as they grow up, his children all leave him, many of them making marriages that he views with disfavour. All his children eventually lead lives of which he cannot approve, and most involve themselves in conditions of great economic hardship. In part, the novel criticizes the psychological effects of Elliot's authoritarian rule; many of the problems of Elliot's children stem from weaknesses of character that may be traceable to their upbringing. But the gulf between John Elliot and his children illustrates most of all the way times have changed. John Elliot and his children belong to different generations, with entirely different values. At one point, when late in life he goes to visit the daughter who lives in Winnipeg, Elliot is asked if he is making progress. He replies indignantly, "Farmers don't make progress. They make a living" (p. 168). Another time his son tells him:

"Farming's becoming an industry. The chief problem is one of finance."

"Finance!" the old man fumed. "Farming is what it has always been. But the whippersnappers of today are not satisfied to make a home' and a living on the farm; you want to make money!"

"Sure!" John agreed again. "You've hit on the difference. We want to make money like everybody else." (p. 210)

Whatever their failings may be John Elliot's children have set their courses and measured their success by different standards from those of the old man. When the children are gathered for the last time at their father's funeral, a feeling arises in them as of the final passing of the old world and the full emergence of the new. They sense that

with him the last link had been broken which so far had held the many divergent forces within the family together as in a sheaf. Henceforth, their eyes would be focused on their own, individual futures. (p. 390)

Another writer who indicates that a liberal philosophy has supplanted conservative assumptions is Hugh MacLennan. Like most Canadian authors, MacLennan sees nineteenth-century Canada, whether English or French, as deeply conservative. MacLennan's pre-war Halifax is a lingering outpost of the past. Uncle Albert and Aunt Maria are characters left over from the Victorian era. Old Halifax lies asleep dreaming of an eternal nineteenth century. The Wain family is an old-fashioned extended unit, seeking to exert control over the loves and careers of its younger members. Similar characteristics are found in MacLennan's portraits of the older generations in rural Quebec and in the Montreal business community. But MacLennan reveals cracks in the carefully preserved edifice of tory thought, and he shows that far-reaching changes in society rapidly take place during and after the First World War. In MacLennan's Halifax and Montreal the younger generation represents a change from a tradition-centred outlook to a technological world-view. Penny Wain and Neil MacRae are both gifted ship designers; Paul Tallard combines the classics with the new scientific

knowledge. In *Two Solitudes* (1945)<sup>5</sup> Paul Tallard goes to Athens and tries to write a novel called *Young Man of 1933* about "a young man caught between the old war that was history and the new one whose coming was so certain it made the present look like the past even before it had been lived through" (p. 313). Finally, he realizes that his scheme is not in keeping with his desire to celebrate individual human life, for by writing about "significant" issues he has created characters who are dominated by circumstances — and whose fate is shaped by conditions in the Old World. As Neil MacRae does in *Barometer Rising* (1914), Paul turns from the Old World and its failures to the New World and its buoyant aspirations for the future. Early in *Two Solitudes* Canada is described as the place where two "old races and religions meet . . . and live their separate legends side by side" (p. 10). However, the book holds out the hope that past hatreds may be bridged by a new generation of Canadians, whose attention is directed towards the possibilities of the future. Late in the novel Paul sees a group of workers in a restaurant as symbols of the coming reconciliation:

They were relaxed and easy with each other, French and English together, radio technician, theatre operators, telegraphers, men who had walked up from the railroad stations. None of them seemed worried or strained. They were together because of the nature of their jobs, and because the rest of the city was asleep. (p. 350)

At the end of the book Paul thinks that the country has taken "the first irrevocable steps towards becoming herself"; the people are realizing that they are "alone with history, with science, with the future" (p. 383).

MacLennan, like Grove and Duncan, suggests that the dominant creed of modern Canadian society is individualism. This philosophy holds that it is each man's inalienable right to pursue his own happiness and that society in the long run is best served by leaving its members free to cultivate their own self-interest. But individualism is not a single monolithic philosophy. An important distinction between forms of individualism can be made on the basis of the attitude taken towards material possessions and towards the changes which technological developments are introducing into society. As George Grant and Northrop Frye have emphasized, Canada's entire history falls within the "modern" period of European history, the period Grant calls the "age of progress."<sup>6</sup> Grant describes the age of progress as characterized by faith in technology and a resultant belief that change is always for the better. Forms of individualism which share this viewpoint may be termed "liberal" or "progressive." Liberalism would interpret the drastic changes brought to the old social structure by industrialism as progress towards a better world. Accordingly, liberal individualism would see an increase in the

<sup>5</sup>Page references are to *Two Solitudes* (New York: Popular Library, n.d.).

<sup>6</sup>George Grant, *Philosophy in the Mass Age* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1959); Northrop Frye, *The Modern Century* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1967).

quantity of material goods as desirable in itself or as a means to greater freedom and happiness for the individual. On the other hand, there is another form of individualism which views the accumulation of material goods as potentially an obstacle to the full realization of one's human potential. This philosophy may be called "tory" individualism. Tory individualism is based on the belief that people are innately social beings who naturally seek to aid one another. It holds that moral standards are innate and that if people are left free to do as they please, they will act for the general good. Tory individualism evaluates all social changes and technological developments according to their moral implications for the individual, rather than according to their impact on his creature comforts or on the overall efficiency of society. Tory individualism is often suspicious of the value of "progress" for its own sake and tends to see modern man as increasingly enslaved by his material goods. Material goods may be an obstacle to the greatest possible realization of one's human potential, since they distract one from the truly important questions, those concerning one's inner self and one's relations to other people. Rather than stressing man's freedom of action as liberal individualism does, tory individualism stresses his moral responsibility to himself and to others.

As George Grant insists in *Lament for a Nation*, diagnosing modern society as liberal to the core is not necessarily the same thing as approving of the whole liberal philosophy.<sup>7</sup> In fact, Canadian writers are nearly unanimous in adopting a critical stance towards liberal individualism. The alternative against which they measure liberal individualism is not the older conservative outlook in its traditional form, but the variant of the new individualist ethos which I have called "tory individualism." Tory individualism is both a critique of the progressive outlook and a continuation of conservative values within the context of individualism. Tory individualism, then, is an attempt to retain moral values as a basis for social conduct. As might be expected, its origins are closely linked with the history of religious thought in Canadian society.

## II

As they record the shift from country to town and city, most writers depict an accompanying decline of formal religion. In turn-of-the-century fiction clergymen are often assigned leading roles, or used to enunciate the moral perspective of a novel. In fiction between the wars, on the other hand, there are few examples of clerics as central characters, and they are seldom accorded the status of spokesman for the author's philosophy. If anything, clerics such as Bishop Foley in *Such is my Beloved* (1934) or Reverend

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<sup>7</sup>George Grant, *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971), pp. 88-97.

Powelly in *Who Has Seen the Wind* are viewed as members of the devil's party. Callaghan's Father Dowling is one of the few clerical heroes from this period, but he is too sincerely religious for the Church herself to tolerate. A more representative clergyman is Philip Bentley in Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and my House* (1941). Philip Bentley no longer even believes in the religion he preaches to the folk of Horizon.

Rural society believed in punitive Old Testament forms of Christianity, like the gloomy Presbyterianism pictured in the first half of Ralph Connor's *The Man From Glengarry* (1901). But when the Old Testament religion moves into a small town, let alone the city, its nature cannot help changing. A town comes into existence for reasons of commerce; among the menfolk, at any rate, a business and therefore a materialistic mentality will necessarily prevail. Social pressures resulting from the grouping of people together make the realities of society take precedence over the spiritual world. Although the external religious forms remain the same, the place of the Old Testament God as judge is taken over by the pressure of public opinion. Religion becomes the cement of society, linking man to his fellow man — instead of, as formerly, linking man to his Almighty God. In Elgin, Ontario, the social role of religion is thoroughly coloured by the commercial mentality:

In Elgin religious fervour was not beautiful or dramatic, or self-immolating; it was reasonable. You were perhaps your own first creditor; after that your debt was to your Maker. You discharged this obligation in a spirit of sturdy equity; if the children didn't go to Sunday school you knew the reason why. The habit of church attendance was not only a basis of respectability, but practically the only one: a person who was "never known to put his head inside a church door" could not be more severely reprobated, by Mrs. Murchison at all events. (p. 60)

In literary small towns religion is a strong social force into the early years of the twentieth century and to an even later date on the prairies. Distinctions are made, some quite subtle, between different theological persuasions; and different styles of piety are matters for extensive analysis and heated comment. Ministers are unquestionably among the leaders of small town society, and their opinions are listened to with respect. As the towns grow, however, the line separating the sacred from the secular becomes more sharply drawn, and the area allotted to the sacred shrinks; religion itself becomes more willing to tolerate materialistic pursuits without condemning them. The rigidity of mind formerly exercised against materialism is transferred to the social sphere, resulting in extreme hostility towards all departures from the social norm. Twentieth-century Canadian writers have consistently seen small town religion as a hypocritical shell of conventionality masking rigid and intolerant attitudes. The devout hypocrite Mrs. Abercrombie in W. O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind* and the devout hypocrite Mrs. Finlay in Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and my House* come to mind immediately.



Criticism of hypocritical and self-righteous religion is actually no recent innovation. Joanna Wood's *The Untempered Wind* (1894)<sup>8</sup> dissects a community that cruelly turns against a woman who bears a child out of wedlock. Of one of the townswomen the author writes: "Mrs. White was a very good woman, therefore she looked unutterable contempt at Myron Holder" (p. 7). The unfeeling condemnation of the town, especially the "merciless virtue" (p. 295) of the women, makes Myron's life a continual torment. However, even when Myron leaves the town to become a nurse, a rigidly moralizing preacher imposes upon her the duty of informing everyone she meets of her past misdeed, presumably so that she may be treated with the unkindness she deserves. The themes of *The Untempered Wind*, sexual transgression and bastardy in conflict with conventional religious attitudes, appear in a remarkable number of works, especially works set in small towns. Another unwed mother is ostracized by an intolerant community in Roberts' *The Heart that Knows* (1906). Bastard children must endure gibes and often physical torments in books ranging from Roberts' Maritime romance to Stead's *The Smoking Flax* (1924) and *Grain* (1926) and Laurence's *The Stone Angel* (1964). In Knowles' *St. Cuthbert's* (1905) the minister must learn to add a leaven of charity to his moral code when it is revealed that the man his daughter loves is the child of an illicit relationship. In depicting small town society, writers criticize such rigid attitudes; they advocate a less dogmatic and more practical form of Christianity, founded on God's love rather than on fear of His power. In this way they hope to re-establish the fading connection between religion and the daily preoccupations of society.

Once religion begins to allow more stress to be placed on material pursuits and less stress on theology, once it begins to emphasize the doing of good works and to insist on social relevance, it is a short step to the position known as the social gospel, which holds that religion is primarily concerned with bringing about a fairer distribution of the goods of the world and better treatment of man by his fellow man. In this way religion takes within its province a host of "social" questions, such as the economics of capital and labour, the lamentable working conditions of factory hands, and the plight of the urban poor. Early variants of the social gospel appear in the books of Ralph Connor and in isolated novels by Agnes Maule Machar and Alberta Carman.

Miss Machar's book is called *Roland Graeme: Knight* (1892); but although Roland Graeme's knighthood derives from membership in the Knights of Labour, his conception of a modern knight's task is more influenced by a Victorian notion of the ideal Spenserian knight than by the books of Henry George, which are supposed to have been formative influences on his thinking. On the title page of the book a revealing motto appears, chosen from Spenser's poem: "To Ride Abroad, Redressing

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<sup>8</sup>Page references are to *The Untempered Wind* (New York: J. Selwyn Tait, 1894).

Human Wrongs.”<sup>9</sup> The dedication also indicates the book’s intention to relate religion to social questions:

To  
Lyman Abbott, D. D.  
One of the first voices in America to enforce the relation of Christianity to  
the labour problem, these pages are respectfully inscribed.

When Roland Graeme applies to the ministers of his town for aid in starting a newspaper that will espouse the working man’s cause, he meets with a mixed response. The Reverend Chillingworth, whose well-off congregation know him best for the eloquence of his sermons and the elegance of his tea-drinking manners, gives an icy refusal; but the Reverend Alden, whose ministry is of a more practical kind, receives Roland with friendly encouragement. In the course of the novel the inadequacy of conventional “charity” is criticized, and the long hours and starvation wages of the factory hands are somewhat alleviated. However, results come more from good-will on the owner’s part and personal magnetism on Roland Graeme’s part than as a consequence of any concerted radical action. Reverend Chillingworth’s initial dismissal of Roland Graeme’s ideas is also partly excused on the grounds that he has received a strict evangelical upbringing and has mistakenly, but sincerely, been taught to despise the world and consider mere “good works” as worthless in themselves.

Albert Carman’s *The Preparation of Ryerson Embury* (1900) is a novel that summarizes most of the stages in the decline of religion. In his quest for meaningful values, Ryerson tries in succession the fundamentalism of his parents, liberal Christianity, free thought (atheism), the socialism of Henry George, bourgeois materialism, and a kind of secular social gospel. Ryerson ends the book by departing for Montreal and planning to become a labour lawyer. The religious significance of the ending is ambiguous. Ryerson appears to end his quest outside the organized church, and in the course of the book his adventures have exposed the closed-minded intolerance and outright hypocrisy of many ostensible Christians. His final creed is somewhat vague, and appears to combine the true social gospel of Reverend Tracy with the nonreligious social radicalism of the founder of the town’s Free Thinker’s club. Perhaps this vagueness matters less than would be expected. Both Reverend Tracy and the famous Free Thinker are agreed that, whether god or man, Jesus was assuredly a social revolutionary; and this belief also becomes part of Ryerson’s creed. Although his formal position is unclear, Ryerson feels he is acting in accord with the true principles of the founder of Christianity.

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<sup>9</sup>No source for the motto is given on the book’s title page. However, Roland Graeme later attributes the line to Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*. See *Roland Graeme: Knight: A Novel of our Time* (New York: Fords, Howard & Hulbert, 1892), p. 124. The actual source is Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*: “Guinevere,” 1. 471.

One of the striking points of agreement between Roland Graeme and Ryerson Embury is the way their idealistic social ideas combine effortlessly with a sunny optimism about the possibility of achieving an improved society. Optimism also dominates Ralph Connor's outlook. *To Him that Hath* (1921), a novel that seems inspired by the Winnipeg General Strike, argues that any and all social questions can be amicably settled if the solution is sought in the spirit of "the way of right doing, of brotherly kindness and of brotherly love."<sup>10</sup> Social problems, Connor's book argues, can be solved by personal initiatives undertaken in a spirit of goodwill. The real obstacles to a solution are, in his book, private jealousies and animosities, not the difficulties inherent in social problems themselves. The ministers of whom Connor thoroughly approves are those who practise a muscular and practical Christianity. They eschew doctrinaire theological debate and subtle theoretical discussions in favour of direct action. Their credo is simplicity itself, like that of the missionary Brown in *The Foreigner* (1909).

Brown had a disconcertingly simple and direct method of dealing with the most complex problems. If a thing was right, it was right; if wrong, it was wrong, and that settled the matter with Brown.<sup>11</sup>

Connor would replace the Old Testament of retribution with the New Testament of love. His ministers and heroes have a streak of feminine emotional susceptibility that enhances rather than detracts from their fitness to be leaders of men. They are not stern and unforgiving judges. They are able to forgive men their trespasses and raise them up from the mire of sin or drink or unbelief. To knotty theological questions, their answer is, in essence, to oppose a faith that God works in mysterious ways and to assert that all will come out for the best, if only belief is steadfastly maintained.

The central families of *The Man From Glengarry* and *The Imperialist* are nominally dominated by strong fathers, but their emotional centre is the mother. The reader first meets Mrs. Murchison in her kitchen "with her family radiating from her" like the spokes from the hub of a wheel (p. 15). In *The Man From Glengarry* the punitive Old Testament religion is weighed in the balance and found wanting, for all its admitted sincerity and character-building power. The minister, Mr. Murray, is incapable of penetrating beneath the moody exterior of Ranald Macdonald and his apparently unregenerate father, Black Hugh. It is the minister's wife, the spokesman for a tolerant New Testament gospel of love and forgiveness, who awakens the slumbering religious consciousness of Black Hugh and calls forth the desire for greatness in young Ranald. Mrs. Murray's religion emphasizes doing good in this world; she takes the world to come serenely for granted in order to get on with the business of living in this one. Thus, although Mrs. Murray is

<sup>10</sup>Ralph Connor, *To Him that Hath: A Novel of the West Today* (New York: A. L. Burt, 1921), p. 277.

<sup>11</sup>Ralph Connor, *The Foreigner* (Toronto: Westminster, 1909), pp. 272-73.

portrayed as the next thing to a saint, her approach to religion actually has materialist implications. The good works that Ranald performs in her name all minister to the physical needs of those whom he seeks to aid. Ranald's success in the west, to which a moral value is ascribed, is actually measured in very material terms: he has provided good food and clean living conditions for his men, and he has accomplished the work of sawing logs into lumber with swiftness and efficiency. Ranald is unselfish, but he is the opposite of other-worldly. Ranald's story shows that Connor's thinking is highly coloured by the materialism he is ostensibly criticizing. Like most of Connor's reformers, Ranald is indistinguishable to modern eyes from a social worker who sees only material causes for society's problems and seeks only material remedies.

Presbyterianism is a vital force in Connor's Glengarry community and is still viable in Duncan's Elgin. But in Stephen Leacock's *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich* (1914) we see the final debasement of this religion. The Presbyterian St. Osoph's church has among its leading members the Overend brothers:

Not that they were, by origin, Presbyterians. But they were self-made men, which put them once and for all out of sympathy with such a place as St. Asaph's (episcopal). "We made ourselves," the two brothers used to repeat in defiance of the catechism of the Anglican Church.<sup>12</sup>

Leacock shows that the pursuit of wealth seems to have become the root motivation of society. The principle of profit and loss is present not only in business affairs, but also in social life, in the university, in politics, and in religion. The business mentality finds its clearest expression in the merger of the two rival churches, which is based on sound financial principles and on no theological principles at all. The charge that society is pervaded by the desire for monetary gain is by no means new. Roland Graeme and Ryerson Embury had already accused factory owners of putting profits ahead of the welfare of their workers. But Leacock is unique in the blanket applications that he makes of this criticism. The human feeling that softens all human contacts in Mariposa does not exist in Plutoria. A secular outlook has wholly supplanted the "seamless canopy"<sup>13</sup> of religion.

Along with Leacock, the severest critic of materialist tendencies in pre-World War I society was Frederick Philip Grove. In *A Search for America* (1927)<sup>14</sup> the most important discovery made by Phil Branden is the existence of not one, but two Americas. There is the America that first strikes a stranger like Phil Branden: America of the great barbeque, vulgar and commercial, devoted to the ruthless pursuit of success. In contrast, there is

<sup>12</sup>Stephen Leacock, *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich* (1914; rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1959), p. 111.

<sup>13</sup>Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967).

<sup>14</sup>Page references are to *A Search for America* (1927; rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971).

America the land of Lincoln, a land devoted to individual self-fulfillment and to aiding others to achieve their own completest self-realization. The distinction is rather like that made between Plutoria and Mariposa in Leacock's two best books. The commercial America Phil Branden finds mainly in the cities, where slick confidence men lurk in hotel lobbies and clever businessmen scheme to extract money from the unwary. The America of Abraham Lincoln is found chiefly in small towns and on the farms, "in little villages, little hamlets, little farmsteads and smithies — wherever men sacrificed their own selfish ends for the general good" (p. 306).

Grove's book, like Leacock's before it, points to the pervasiveness in North America of what Robert Heilbroner calls the "monetization" of society. The modern acquisitive society, Heilbroner says,

rests on a social arrangement which makes the struggle for money unavoidable, and that social arrangement can best be described as a contest of individuals for the security of wealth. Shorn of fixed status, deprived of a guaranteed level of life, the individual must win his own salvation *in the market place*, and it is this necessity, and not avarice, which makes him and his society money-valuing, money-oriented and money-minded.<sup>15</sup>

Money-mindedness is not confined only to North America, and it has origins dating back at least to the Renaissance, but in North America it achieves its apotheosis. As Robert Fulton, the immigrant Englishman, says in Jessie G. Sime's *Our Little Life* (1921),

in older countries there are things still (not many) which can be had without money; but in the new countries there is nothing which can be had without money — things unbuyable and unsaleable don't exist there.<sup>16</sup>

Money-mindedness is closely related to the attitude already described as liberal individualism and is an underlying constant that can be perceived in the varied pictures of society offered by many post-war writers. In fact, money-mindedness is not absent from earlier literature. One of the subtle sources of humour in *The Man from Glengarry* is the incongruity of Yankee Jim's monetary metaphors, when he tries to discuss the theological verities with solemn Scottish-Canadian Presbyterians. The citizens of Elgin, Ontario, rejoice exceedingly on the Queen's Birthday, but they are also proud of being part of a highly "go-ahead" society: that is, a society devoted to the pursuit of money and individual happiness.

The money-mindedness of society is usually justified by the argument that the pursuit of wealth is only a means to the pursuit of happiness; liberal

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<sup>15</sup>Robert Heilbroner, *The Quest for Wealth: A Study of Acquisitive Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), p. 212.

<sup>16</sup>Jessie G. Sime, *Our Little Life: A Novel of Today* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1921), p. 8.

individualism serves personal individualism, runs the argument. The common ground of society is to be found in the well-being and contentment that money brings. Canadian writers have not accepted this argument. They describe children who leave old-fashioned families to pursue wealth for themselves but do not gain happiness. Their city-dwellers are seldom happy, and when they are happy their contentment does not come through wealth or material possessions. The monetized society is in many respects a great democratic levelling instrument. In the completely monetized society the only medium of communication between individuals is money. Other considerations become secondary or irrelevant in measuring an individual's status. As Leacock says in *Sunshine Sketches* (1912), "it was a favorite method in Mariposa if you wanted to get at the real worth of a man, to imagine him clean sold up, put up for auction as it were."<sup>17</sup> Monetization means that the individual becomes a social atom, identical to every other individual in the only respect that matters — the ability to receive and to spend money. But if men are reduced simply to buyers or sellers, receivers and seekers of money, what happens to the other aspects of their personalities? In a monetized society, men need no more personality than a bank pass-book. But men do have personalities and feelings; consequently, a society which relegates these attributes to an incidental position will be a society which creates a great deal of dissatisfaction and alienation. It will be inhabited, as the writers show repeatedly, by confused little men searching for something their society cannot ever provide.

### III

In fiction set between the wars the writers' primary criticisms are no longer directed at out-dated forms of religion but at the materialist values of a commercial society. However, there is an important point of agreement between the critics of society and the society they are criticizing. Both sides of the dispute accept the idea that the proper basis for human conduct is individualism. Individualism has not always been dominant in Canadian society. The characters who make up MacLennan's older generation cannot be thought of apart from their social context; their identity is defined by their adherence to a social code. The new generation of individualists, on the other hand, can be thought of as each living separately, without appealing to other people or to traditional authority to sanction their conduct. Morley Callaghan's individuals seek to discover a personal standard by which to conduct their lives. Grove's characters often already possess a personal standard that allows them to resist considerable social pressure. Callaghan's individuals are pieces of flotsam tossed about on a stream,

<sup>17</sup>Stephen Leacock, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912; rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1960), p. 34.

trying to swim against the current; Grove's individuals are immovable bulwarks against which the stream batters and parts. Neither writer portrays characters who are an integral part of the flow of their society. If the characters adhere to a code of behaviour, it is an inner one.

In Morley Callaghan's first novel, *Strange Fugitive* (1928), Harry Trotter inhabits a world from which all values save those of the predatory business ethic seem to have been removed. Callaghan presents Trotter's progress from workman to one of the unemployed to bootlegger to corpse with the objectivity of a scientist observing a rat attempting to find its way through a maze. Indeed, the novel is very like a laboratory experiment. It is as if Callaghan said to himself: I'll create a man who is entirely the creature of his times, with no carryovers from the past such as religion or respect for conventional taboos; he won't be too smart but he won't be dumb either, just an average guy. Then I'll turn him loose in a modern city, without the headstart of wealth or the handicap of poverty, and watch what happens to him. The results, from a moral point of view, are appalling. In Callaghan's book the plush world of Leacock's Plutoria has been unmasked. Leacock's businessmen are really as predatory and pitiless as the hoodlums and shady politicians who attend Harry Trotter's vulgarly extravagant party — his counterpart to the gala all-night social functions which take place at the Mausoleum Club. Together, *Arcadian Adventures* and *Strange Fugitive* present the problems of the city, but do not venture on a solution.

Other books do attempt to affirm that a morally meaningful life can be lived in an urban setting. Jessie G. Sime's *Our Little Life* finds meaning in the patience and sacrificial generosity of an ageing Scottish immigrant in Montreal who earns a precarious living as a woman who "sews by the day" for the minor plutocracy. Callaghan's own subsequent fiction searches for solutions in a number of directions. The stories of Father Dowling and Kip Caley in *Such is my Beloved* and *More Joy in Heaven* (1937) hold out the possibility that the individual may still save his own soul although society as a whole may be irredeemable. But it is *They Shall Inherit the Earth* (1935)<sup>18</sup> that most strongly suggests that the intrinsic value of human life transcends any material system and that faith in the continuance of life can redeem any past transgressions.

Morley Callaghan's *They Shall Inherit the Earth* holds out the hope that the innate virtue of the little people, the poor in spirit, shall in the last analysis become the basis for a renewed society. Andrew Aikenhead has lived his life according to the business ethic, and according to that ethic he has achieved success. Yet the opening of the book finds him seeking to renew contact with his son and feeling "as though he had at last taken a necessary step that would bring joy again into his life" (p. 11). The system by which Andrew has lived is expressed by his partner, Jay Hillquist, with whom as a young man

<sup>18</sup>Page references are to *They Shall Inherit the Earth* (1934; rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1962).

Andrew "had made such ardent plans to make money." When Andrew's personal problems distract him from the affairs of their advertising firm, Jay is angry that sentiment should interfere with his sense of business efficiency:

As he muttered "To think I'd ever see the day when I'd let a personal relationship interfere with business," his heart was troubled and he was full of secret shame. Yet he would not let himself respond to the urge from the deeper part of his nature, for he felt it would be a betrayal of everything he stood for in his daily life. (p. 135)

Andrew's son, Michael Aikenhead, has left home and gone in pursuit of something, he doesn't quite know what. But whatever it is, it is different from his father's business ethic. At one point on a hunting trip in the Ontario countryside, Michael is prompted to burst out violently against the predatory nature of the capitalist system:

"A wolf is an individualist," Mike said. "They kill out of the sheer lust of killing, and they kill without sense. . . . If you want it to be clear that a man is ruthless and an enemy of society you call him a wolf, don't you? . . . Any enemy of the race you call a wolf because he knows no moral law, and that's why you can't organize society, because it's full of wolves, and they don't know justice, and don't want it. The financial brigands and labour exploiters and the war profiteers and the Wall Street sharks and nearly anybody who tries to put his head up in a world of private profit, what are they? Wolves I tell you." (pp. 189-90)

What Michael has been searching for, he realizes at last, is a way of feeling "single and whole" within himself. That is, he cannot be happy while his life is compartmented, as Jay Hillquist's is. He must have a set of values to live by, and all aspects of his life must be compatible with those values. He cannot be kind in private life and predatory in his work. Michael's resolution is finally achieved not by means of any external intellectual system such as the Communism of his friend Bill Johnson or the Catholicism of the former Jew Nathaniel Benjamin, but through his love for the girl Anna Prychoda, by whom he has a child. Anna embodies in herself the wholeness which Michael seeks. There is no separation in her between her external behaviour and the "deeper part" of her nature:

She went on from day to day, living and loving and exposing the fullness and wholeness of herself to the life around her. If to be poor in spirit meant to be without false pride, to be humble enough to forget oneself, then she was poor in spirit, for she gave herself to everything that touched her, she let herself be, she lost herself in the fullness of the world, in the losing herself she found the world, and she possessed her own soul. (p. 242).

The emotional release brought about by his relationship with Anna allows Michael to forgive himself for the part he played in the drowning of his half-brother, David Choate, and to accept his father's offer of a renewed



love. Callaghan can permit a happy resolution because he sees human nature as having a underlying unity. Men are united by their common core of morality, which is the same in each individual and does not depend for its existence and authority on an external God or a formalized system of beliefs.

Saving oneself while society goes down the primrose path or sacrificing oneself to no apparent purpose may satisfy a certain kind of mentality, but may appear futile to some other people. In other words, Callaghan's philosophy may not appear adequate to a writer like Grove. The society of liberal individualism within which Callaghan's characters are trying to save themselves is clearly a society in which changes are taking place: a society on the way to some unknown destination. It is not a static or a stable structure. Callaghan takes the changing society much as he finds it and studies the possibilities of moral action within that society. Grove takes the fact of change as one of his chief themes and tries to determine whether the direction of change is in fact towards good or towards bad. He is seldom completely satisfied if his characters pursue a strictly personal salvation. The question of whether society as whole may be saved is a continuing preoccupation throughout his career.

Phil Braden comes to see America as "a problem which had to be solved if the world, as I saw it, was to be saved" (p. 146). For Phil Branden, America represents the future, whereas Europe is weighed down by the failures of the past. It seems the quality of the future will depend on the direction in which the energies of America are channelled. As he discovers more and more of the hidden virtues of the land of Lincoln, Phil develops a hopeful attitude. America is plainly a nation in process of evolution; he becomes convinced that the course of its development is ever upward, ever towards the good:

Although I saw suffering and injustice on every hand, I began to sense the great undercurrent of an evolution towards fairness, towards what is morally right and true. Individual men and women might resist this current, . . . yet I began to see more and more clearly that the very essence of the nation's life was a recognition of that which is fair and just, and a firm resolve to help it along to a final victory. (p. 322)

For a long time Branden believes in the godness of the essentially rural America. The cities he thinks of as symptoms of an illness that can be controlled, if treated in time.

Phil Branden's hope for America rests on his faith that man's desire for order will eventually triumph over the chaos created by unrestrained individualism. Americans will learn to restrain their personal impulses in order to further the common good. Branden says that "real democracy can be arrived at only in one of two ways, by collective ownership or by a limitation of wealth" (p. 380). Yet his faith is not in the power of any panacea such as Communism or socialism to effect change. His hope is based on a belief that men are inherently good and have a natural instinct to put the

general welfare above personal considerations. Although Branden expresses no faith in any particular formal religious system, he can express a general faith in man because he believes the Judeo-Christian concept of man's moral nature to be the true one. *A Search for America* is, with the exception of one footnote (p. 382), basically optimistic about the final development of North American society. Phil Branden condemns the pervasive commercialization of America, but when he considers the possibilities inherent in mechanized means of production, he finds room for hope. The chief requirement is education: a properly educated workman would understand and take pride in his job; he would be a craftsman, not an uncomprehending mechanical drudge. Such an educational ideal was easily within the scope of practical achievement. With, in addition, a little intelligent government regulation, the state of society could soon be improved:

I hold no monopoly in common sense. But, couple such a system of education — which would breed craftsmen instead of labourers — with a half-way sensible system of labour-exchanges — as any group of intelligent men could work out in an hour or so — and you will soon have done away with a major part of the causes of present unrest . . . (p. 304)

In *The Master of the Mill* (1944)<sup>19</sup> Grove returns to the question of industrialization and offers a less optimistic conclusion. A greater exposure to the effects of technological change upon society leads him to doubt man's ability to master the machine. Grove now sees technological change itself, and not moral betterment, as the guiding force of history. Instead of producing a nation of craftsmen, as Phil Branden had hoped, the evolving machine produces a nation of mechanical men, whose only purpose in life is to keep the machinery of the nation in smooth running order. Men become the slaves of the machine, instead of masters. Even Edmund Clark's financial wizardry is, in the last analysis, subservient to the logic of the machine. Education offers no freedom after all, for the dominant educational requirement becomes not the creation of a cultured intellectual but the production of engineers and technicians to minister to the burgeoning machinery. The worst nightmare of society becomes the secret fear that in the end the machines may take over completely and eliminate even their token dependence on men. Sam Clark imagines the mill as a planet in itself, "revolving around the sun or some other star, like a meteor through a final chaos, scattering flour dust in its interstellar wake" (p. 319). The world is evolving, but it may not be progressing towards any ethical good. Moreover, the most dire possibility is that there may be no pattern at all to the course of evolution. In that case, where does meaning reside? If life is a randomly determined series of events, what possibility exists of discovering any unifying factor in the social fabric? The mill without men is utterly sterile; life

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<sup>19</sup>Page references are to *The Master of the Mill* (1944; rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1961).

without a purpose appears utterly futile. As his final act on earth Sam Clark justifies his life by imagining that the mill will in fact lead to "a novel sort of civilization, raised on the idea of a magic liberation of man from the curse of labour, setting him free for greater and higher tasks" (p. 237). But whether Sam's ideas are the inspiration of a seer or the idle dreams of a senile old man is not clear. And matters are further clouded by the ambiguous last chapter of the book.

Some of Grove's characters attempt to find an existential meaning to life in the sheer determination required to persevere in the face of the apparent futility of things. In the final scene of *Two Generations* (1939) the patriarchal Ralph Paterson tries to combat his own sense of life's futility by understanding his son Phil's basically existential outlook. In response to a question, Phil says:

"Meaning. We don't ask for one. But we see a purpose."

"And that is?"

"For life to be lived and enjoyed while it propagates itself."

"Is there nothing that we ought to believe in?"

"When it comes to belief, the word "ought" loses its significance.

We believe what we must."

Again Ralph paced the room, profoundly disquieted. "Why work, then? Why slave? Why try to do right?"

"Because we can't help ourselves; not because we're commanded to. Every command calls for rebellion unless it's assented to; and assent doesn't depend on our will. We must because we're we and alive."<sup>20</sup>

On the whole, however, Grove found existentialism unsatisfactory. The well-known passage of authorial comment in *A Search for America* beginning "We come indeed from Hell and climb to Heaven" (p. 382) expresses an apparently existential satisfaction with the sense of achievement that comes from struggling towards a perpetually unobtainable goal. Yet in it Grove has not shed the progressive idea that society is developing through higher and higher stages. Behind even the existential surface of Phil Paterson's remarks lurks Grove's habitual tragic outlook: men on earth seem controlled by some power greater than themselves; purpose exists, but it is a purpose which men cannot fathom.

Other Canadian writers have been even less receptive to existential ideas. Philip Child's Mr. Ames has "the secret belief that everyone in the world was in some way alone and afraid of something" (p. 137). But Mr. Ames proposes an orthodox Christian and moral solution to the problem of man's aloneness. In *The Village of Souls* (1933) Child, in a passage of authorial comment, indicates that he knows about but does not fully accept existential ideas about man's essential aloneness. Of his hero he says:

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<sup>20</sup>Frederick Philip Grove, *Two Generations* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1939), p. 260.

He may have felt, though he could never have found words for the feeling, that only in the consummation of love can a man share his loneliness with another and make for himself a dustspeck world within the infinite wilderness, forgetting for a little its pressure which never ceases upon a man's spirit.<sup>2</sup>

Callaghan's Michael Aikenhead at one point tells Anna: "You know how I could show you it was important and not just accidental that we love each other and want to be always together? I could die, or we both could die, and then we'd make it important" (p. 155). But Michael immediately rejects the possibility of an existential defiance of the universe, and the book as a whole repudiates these ideas entirely.

It should be clear by now that Canadian writers have rejected all rigidly imposed external systems, whether they are theological ones such as Presbyterianism or Catholicism or secular ones such as Communism or socialism. Yet they have by no means given up on the values associated with traditional religion. Their ideas have often been based on a moral regeneration of the individual, a kind of secular salvation. Irene Baird's *Waste Heritage* (1939) is one of the few books that, even by implication, supports a radical programme of social reform. Yet even this book evokes biblical echoes by its transformation of Vancouver and Victoria into the cities of Aschelon and Gath (see II Sam. 1: 20). Not even in the Depression do unions become a means of resolving the problems of society. Only Irene Baird and Hugh Garner explore the plight of the worker in full-length fiction. (Admittedly, there were a large number of Depression short stories). Unions actually seem to be more prominent in writers' minds around the turn of the century and shortly after World War One, when they had perhaps not been tarred so heavily with the red-baiter's brush. A religious note, then, colours a great deal of the social analysis in Canadian fiction. The Depression comes into Canadian literature almost as a punishment for a too-great absorption in the liberal individualist way of life; it is an act of God more than an act of man. Similarly, it is to be remedied by greater faith, not by human action. This viewpoint is still evident in John Marlyn's relatively recent *Under the Ribs of Death* (1957). In Morley Callaghan's books the Depression appears as a trial and expiation, a time for reforming the individual soul, not as an economic injustice to be blamed on specific social causes and remedied by specific social measures. *They Shall Inherit the Earth* ends with the birth of a child, the renewal of understanding between a father and son, and a prayer for mercy; it appears that Michael Aikenhead cannot get a job as an engineer until he has expiated his guilt and recovered his ability to love.

Up to the Second World War writers held to the faith that if man only looked deeply enough within himself, he would find a substratum of morality, a common sense of right and wrong which could serve as a basis of the social fabric. Thus, in their evaluation of the new liberal society Canadian

<sup>2</sup> Philip Child, *The Village of Souls* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1948), p. 294.

writers have generally spoken from the position I have called tory individualism. They have not approved of the new society or of its methods. Canadian writers have not been fascinated by machinery and bigness in themselves. A book like Alan Sullivan's *The Rapids* (1922), which glorifies the role of the technological visionary, is distinctly the exception in Canadian literature. The men who exercise power through the obscure financial manipulations of the modern business world are also usually viewed in a dubious light, at best. Hugh MacLennan, for example, once hoped that the new Canada would be a humanized technological society, but in *The Watch that Ends the Night* (1959) he appears to have retreated into a more personal position, in which each individual can only save his own soul. In the final cadences of *The Watch that Ends the Night* George Stewart, confronted with the impending death of his much-loved wife Catherine, is forced to ask himself questions about the ultimate significance of life in this world. His conclusions sum up the emotional affirmation that so many of the writers mentioned in this paper have been struggling to articulate:

Nobody — this I knew — can ever know in advance how he will feel when he encounters the finality. Often I dreaded it; often I rebelled against this fate of ours. But toward the summer's end I had almost ceased to think about it at all. Remembering the years when she had wrung life and joy out of pain and perpetual exhaustion, I knew, deep inside, that this struggle was not valueless.<sup>22</sup>

MacLennan's novel ends with an expression of faith renewed; and in sounding what is really a religious note MacLennan is not alone. Callaghan's novels and some of Grove's works also advocate a humanism based on the Judeo-Christian conception of man as the antidote to the depersonalizing materialism by which society seems to be taking away the separate identities of individuals. In important ways the values advanced by Callaghan, MacLennan, and Grove are continuous of the values advocated by the earlier writers, who thought religion needed to move beyond rigid moral formulas and pat answers to social questions. What has changed in the later writers is the emphasis accorded to the individual as the source of all values. Canadian writers have not advocated the notion of the individual as a *tabula rasa* free to alter his own nature as he sees fit, a concept that underlies the "American Dream" of success. But they have come to terms with individualism by making the individual himself the custodian and guarantor of the moral values once thought to be validated by external authority. In this way, accepting individualism has not meant accepting the American social ideal of the pursuit of individual liberty and happiness above all else. Rather, we could say that the tory individualism that Canadian writers have championed comes about when the Canadian constitutional ideal of "peace, order, and good government" is internalized by individual members of society.

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<sup>22</sup>Hugh MacLennan, *The Watch that Ends the Night* (1959; rpt. Toronto: Signet, 1968), p. 349.