

Article

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MY RECOLLECTIONS OF THE WEST

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I

INTRODUCTION

One hundred years ago, the province of Manitoba was set up and we are today celebrating that event. Since those early days, when there was little at the confluence of the two rivers but the stone fort which had but recently witnessed the experiences that led to the birth of the province, and of which a bit still remains, a great city has arisen and out beyond that city, stretching in every direction, are the towns and villages and the countryside of this central Canadian province, this keystone in the arch. May I wish it well? Manitoba has had its vast contribution to make to our common Canadian life and out of its soil, in the century that has elapsed, have come not only wheat, cattle and oats, but thousands of vigorous citizens and many score of able, yes, more than able – brilliant – sons and daughters. Manitoba, you Place of the Great Spirit, I salute you.

Let me not forget that other anniversary that falls this year – the three hundredth anniversary of the Hudson's Bay Company. Company and Province, they have been close together, nowhere more so than in this city of Winnipeg. Three hundred years is a long time – so long that an Indian, who was once asked what the letters H.B.C. stood for, replied, "Some say, it stands for 'Here before Christ'." It may be so. The missionary followed the Company, at any rate.

It is not often that two such anniversaries fall together. To both the celebrants my warmest good wishes.

I presume you are laying hands on Frank Underhill and myself before we elude you by slipping off to that realm where the historian's commodity – time – no longer exists. Both of us, I am sure, will, if permitted, be glad to report back to you on the nature of a timeless existence. Frank and I have had similar careers, as we have had almost identical backgrounds – both products of the small towns of Ontario, with their nice people, their good schools, their narrowness and their kindness. Both graduates of the same university, both having had the same lectures from the same professors, though not at the same time. Both of us came out west to get a bit of the

twentieth century while it still belonged to Canada, both went back east but with the west ever in our mind's eye. Both of us have had our bumps, and for somewhat the same reasons. Both have survived them. Both — and it is the privilege of the old to brag a little — have been members of what I think has been one of the most significant generations in Canadian history. As such, we have no reason to fear the generation gap — it is all in our favour. You people who are treading on our heels, you see that you do as well!

I give this paper by request, so I take no responsibility for its contents. My knowledge of "the West" I do not consider large. My West was Winnipeg, where I lived for sixteen years, Winnipeg varied by occasional forays into the countryside and by tours to the larger cities. What, anyway, is the West and where does it begin? Latitude is a reality, longitude a convention. Yet it is not hard to get a working notion of the idea underlying the word, which is newness and the values of newness. Frontier values are easy to discern. In my youth I found them in the bush in northern Ontario. In my middle years I found them in the West. The same values: adaptability, the love of equality, a bluff manliness, a short-range approach, a conviction that nature had given so much that no matter how much was despoiled there would always be lots more left. A tremendous feeling of hope, coupled with an easy readiness to destroy the natural bounties on which hope rested. Such values were necessarily rural, but they were carried into the cities, and they will be long disappearing.

II

THE UNIVERSITY WORLD

I came to Winnipeg in 1929. The educational equipment of the University and the colleges struck me at once as shabby and I soon found that the standards in many of the departments were the same. Matriculation required only three years and behind matriculation lay the little one and two teacher "high schools" of a thinly populated countryside. Even in Winnipeg, a peculiar educational philosophy prevailed which insisted that "you should teach not a subject, but children". This was often translated into requiring that a person who had some special training in one subject should teach another. If you knew some chemistry, you were set to teach Latin, for example. This deplorable situation was redeemed to a considerable extent by the energy and good average abilities of the students. These qualities were conspicuous in those who went on to higher education. The university world in Manitoba was made tolerable for me by the high qualities of my students, their eagerness and

their friendliness — this joined to the good companionship of many of my colleagues. Relief of that sort was essential, for the workload was incredibly heavy. I found I had to teach four courses, four hours a week. In addition I put students into groups of eight or ten and gave them each an hour's special instruction. One year I read over 800 pieces of work, some of them long essays. There was a full set of examinations at Christmas. One was lucky if he had finished marking before the New Year's term began.

The hard grind was good for me. I did my most useful work evaluating and criticizing student essays, as many an ex-student has often told me. The innumerable fields of history in which I had to teach gave me an overall look at the human story of the last five thousand years which every historian ought to have but which, in this age of rather silly specialization, few do have. What a pity, for, though younger historians may not realize it, they have in their discipline the finest of materials for a philosophic education.

The University of Manitoba had a fringe about it of "affiliated colleges". This system was not at all the same as the federation of the University of Toronto. The University examined, the colleges had the right to teach whatever they wished. The University was relatively strong, the colleges weak. After the horrible events of 1932 — the defalcations — the reverse became to some extent true. The result of the system and especially of the hard times was institutional jealousy and distrust which sometimes extended to the relations between colleagues. Manitoba was not a pleasant place to teach in.

The situation was rescued, as I have said, by one's students. Year after year there appeared the same succession of able — brilliant — young men and women. I cannot entirely account for that. The new country had something to do with it. Whatever the explanation, the students in the bulk were as I have described them. Many have made their mark. A large number hold high positions at Ottawa, a good many have been in Parliament, one is president of one of our great railways. Part of the explanation may lie in the very nature of the old United College physical plant — the crowded old building, with everyone at a short arm's length from everyone else, every teacher's office door constantly open, and so on. Then there was the remarkable group of men on the staff. Need I name more than Arthur Phelps, Watson Kirkconnell, Jack Pickersgill, David Owen? I pay tribute to the old college, where I slaved amid poverty and the lack of most of the facilities that this modern, degenerate generation would consider necessary. Educationally, the college "delivered the goods" — and the instructors received as large a share of them as did the students.

III

WINNIPEG

It is no small accomplishment to have built a great city in a century, and yet a century is not enough for the impression of newness to have worn off. When I first saw Winnipeg it looked to me like a new city. There were many substantial buildings. The Legislative Building was both substantial and, I think, a triumph. But many of the public buildings, some churches excepted, were architectural curiosities, and much of the housing was of more or less shabby frame construction. Today, great changes have taken place.

What makes Winnipeg, however, is not buildings but people. I mean the character of the people, the human tone they emit. Liveliness, energy, adaptability, friendliness, these were the traits that impressed themselves on me. People walked briskly. That is probably climatic. Geography has also contributed. Winnipeg is an isolated city — five hundred miles to its nearest neighbour, Minneapolis. Modern media are decreasing the significance of this, but Winnipeg had a chance to grow up on its own, finding its own way of life. Contrast Toronto whose sight for decades was firmly fixed on London and today is even more firmly fixed on New York, of which metropolis it may be regarded as a suburb. I refer you to the Saturday edition of the *Globe and Mail* for illustration, especially to the cultural and entertainment sections which often seem to me as if written by persons living in New York and condescendingly sending back to their country cousins news of that great world to which they do not belong but would like to belong. I never found this trait dominant in Winnipeg. Winnipeg's independence in isolation meant a great deal to me, for if there is one thing I find harder to stand than another, it is the mentality of the man, or the community, who goes through life tied to his step-mother's spiritual apron strings.

Winnipeg's mastery of at least part of its own soul has also owed much to its possession of a spacious hinterland. It grew up holding the gorgeous west in fee, and it has not yet entirely lost it, even though this is a hard world for sub-metropolitan independence, a world with a few giants towering higher and higher over the lesser centres.

I had hardly got to Winnipeg before I began to feel the presence of a mysterious, brooding something overhanging the city, a something intangible but real. I soon traced it to the office building of the *Manitoba Free Press* and within that building to the sanctum

of one John Wesley Dafoe, who reigned therein, enthroned upon a deep, black leather chair (more like a lounge than a throne, really). Dafoe never in his life held public office but invariably he seemed to be infused into all those matters which seemed worthy of his interest. Few men could have had such a fortification from which to shoot. The voice of the *Free Press* thundered from the Lakes to the Mountains and, when it thundered, governments quaked. In the course of my years in Winnipeg, Dafoe attracted to his staff many a man of ability and background. Such men — there comes to mind, for example, Hamish McGeachy — gave to the *Free Press* an interest and a finish that Canadian newspapers rarely achieve.

Surprise has often been expressed at the constant independence of the *Free Press* in matters that seemed to cross the interests of its proprietors, the Siftons. The major illustration usually cited is the way in which, in 1911, Dafoe came out for Reciprocity, whereas Sir Clifford Sifton was one of the leaders in the Liberal revolt against Laurier's policy. It would be too charitable to put that bit of tolerance down to the width of the Liberal mentality, though that might come into it. But in 1911, there were other aspects of the situation. The attitude of the western farmers, needless to say, was wholly for Reciprocity. An explanation of the *Free Press's* liberty given by one of its enemies may therefore be plausible. At that time, the company was building its new office structure. It had got as far as the excavation. The story retailed to me was that Sifton was ready to have his paper follow his own line but was confronted by a telegram from Winnipeg to the effect that, if he made the paper take his line, he might as well forget about his new building and content himself with the hole in the ground. This argument proved more effective than the merits of reciprocity.

I met Dafoe shortly after I arrived in Winnipeg. There was a small group of men who used to gather in the Manitoba Club and, as one of them put it, "pick each other's brains". I was invited to their meetings, which ranged over subjects of a public nature. The group was the predecessor in Winnipeg of the Institute of International Affairs. In both of these it was a case of "where MacGregor sits being the head of the table". Not that the Old Man in any sense consciously attempted to dominate any group of which he formed a part; he just did so, just by his very presence. He might not say much but, when he intervened, it was to the point, succinctly and decisively. Debate with him was not stiff and constrained but easy and amiable — and not too difficult in dialectic either, for his strength lay not so much in sheer intellectual keenness as in his long experience, his tenacious memory, the wealth of information he could bring to bear on a point and the wide way

in which he could look at it. Unlike many another man prominent in Canadian life, he invariably knew what he was talking about.

Dafoe was a typical product of his heredity and of the upper Ottawa valley. His heredity made him a Loyalist and a monarchist, aspects of his creed which he never entirely forsook, and the upper Ottawa, where English and French were mingled, made him suspicious of the French. On the bi-cultural problem he evidently found it hard to be objective. I remember writing a letter to the *Free Press* during the first year or two of the war, pleading for understanding. I accompanied it with a personal note. He wrote back, suggesting the time for such a letter was not opportune. It would never be, of course.

When I knew him, frontier pasts had long since vanished, but J. W. could never have been mistaken for anything but what he was — as genuine a middle class Canadian as well could be, an acute and kindly man of strong common sense, not afflicted with the sentimentalities of the Methodism in which he had been more or less brought up, but, unknown to himself, pushed on by the dynamic of that idealistic creed. I have a good deal to say about him in *My First Seventy-Five Years* and do not wish to repeat myself here. Just let me say that it seemed to me that his judgment was informed by a massive common sense and by his unfailing ability to recall something out of his experience that illustrated the point he wanted to make. On one occasion, for example, he was discussing the Privy Council with me. "As I remember Bishop Laffèche saying in 1893", he said, "watch for the judgment the Privy Council will be rendering : it is a political court." This concerned the judgment on the Manitoba Separate Schools. He once told me what was supposed to be the inside story of the collapse of Macdonald and his administration in 1873, the occasion when Macdonald came down with a wobble in his seat after attempting to defend himself against Donald Smith. Later I wrote to him and he sent me a great long letter with much detail from his informant, who, as I remember the affair now, had shown him a certain memoir by Peter Mitchell, containing the story. About the same time A. L. Burt told me that he had seen a copy of the same memoir. That is where I first read it. Dr. Doughty showed it to me but would not let me take a copy of it. I wrote to Dafoe for verification, as he had previously told me about it. Burt later published it in the *Canadian Historical Review*. There is also a copy in one of the collections in the Public Archives, the Macdonald Papers, I think. Dafoe had read it apparently, about 1895, and I had asked him about it in, I think, 1936. But his recollection tallied exactly with Burt's publication of the original. Pretty good for some forty years!

Apart from his office, Dafoe's favourite centre seemed to be the Winnipeg Branch of the Institute of International Affairs. At its meetings all sorts of topics were threshed out, invariably good-humouredly – though one high court judge resigned his membership because, it was reported, he could not listen to the treason talked there. Dafoe was never like that. Anything seemed to be a subject of fair debate, but he could hit much harder through his editorials than orally.

Around the Institute there gathered a congenial and able group of men. I think of E. J. Tarr, J. B. Coyne, Joseph Thorson, "Solly" Thorvaldsen, Rod Finlayson, among others. Together they did a great deal to bring out the conceptions of Canadian nationality that have since won acceptance but which at that time got some of us, myself included, into hot water with the old guard. For the old guard massed about the other daily paper, the *Tribune*, was still very much of a reality – men who could not rise to the imaginative heights of Canadianism and who believed analysis and, still more, innovation were treason.

Dafoe himself had tried to reconcile his ancestral sentiments with his Canadianism and his desire for a peaceful world. His ancestral sentiments prevented him carrying Canadianism to the point of advocating independence – a word that had an entirely different ring from "autonomy" – hence he found in international organization the solvent for our local clashes of allegiance. This made him a strong proponent of the League of Nations. I think he faltered a little in clear-sightedness here, for he would not face the two issues that lay underneath international organization – national sovereignty and the balance of power. In this respect he was like his fellow Canadians. Few were ready to think in terms of Canada as a sovereign, independent state, and most people who thought about such things at all – and they were few – conceived of "the balance of power" as a dangerous Germanic contribution to statecraft. It was "realpolitik", Machiavellian; in short, wicked. The true faith was found in international co-operation under the rule of law. Fine ideals, if they could be made to work!

The Winnipeg branch of the Institute represented these various points of view. It was predominantly middle-class, Liberal, somewhat idealistic – in other words, typically WASP. Many of its members were also members of the Manitoba Club. That is, they were upper middle-class. Such members, whether political Liberals or not, were pretty strongly attached to things as they were in domestic matters. They were men whom previous English centuries would have called Whigs – close to being the opposite numbers of

eighteenth-century Walpolians, but without the corruption or the class pride of eighteenth-century England. Most of them, if living in the eighteenth century, would have been strong supporters of the Revolution settlement, parliament men – distinctly not church and king men.

Labour was not interested in such trivialities as international affairs, it would seem : at least the branch, if my memory is correct, never included representatives of Labour, except intermittently. I don't think John Queen was a member, though his son-in-law, Queen-Hughes, was. Nor were there ever more than three or four "New Canadians". I do not include in that term Icelandic Canadians who, as a group, are rapidly becoming indistinguishable from others, though retaining their propre pride of origin. Among them Joseph Thorson, the late Senator Thorvaldson and Judge Lindall stand out in my memory.

The Institute never succeeded in enlisting and retaining members from the right, the hard core of "the establishment".

Dafoe and his circle were not the whole of Winnipeg. The other pole of attraction you will know in advance. It was that represented and led by J. S. Woodsworth. I never learned much about Woodsworth's circle, I'm afraid; in fact, he maintained to me once that he really did not know who his supporters were. But I soon got to know Woodsworth and am proud to think that he included me on his list of friends. I was often in his home. He never ceased to take an interest in the college, of which he had been one of the early graduates and for which he remained a representative figure. Woodsworth was one typical product of Methodism, just as Dafoe was another. In both, the dynamic idealism was there, plain for all to see, though it manifested itself in different ways. I could never share Woodsworth's political creed, whatever it was, but I could never see that that made any difference in my relationships with him. I came to know him as a Christian gentleman – though unorthodox, of course – a man whose kind had been familiar to me all my life, whose kind had deeply coloured the society in which I had been brought up. His creed? I cannot believe that it was ever a matter of the mind to him. It was a deep concern for the underdog, a striving for decency among men. He called himself a socialist of some sort, I suppose. In fact, he was a humanitarian. I doubt if he were much interested in the intellectual formulae, the metaphysical sociological niceties deriving from German Marxism. He would have put intellectualism a long way down the list when it came to simple matters of right and wrong and to human need.

Woodsworth came to count more and more in this country because he was a man of utter sincerity. Dafoe dominated by the weight of his personality put behind his intellectual analysis of things. Woodsworth, I suspect, had little taste for leadership, still less for domination. If he became a prominent figure in our history, it was because of his character. He was a man whom anyone would have felt honoured to know.

In no other Canadian city, I am sure, was there such a pair. I do not know what the relations were between them. Correct, I suppose. Woodsworth no doubt would have censured Dafoe for being too "worldly", Dafoe Woodsworth for being "an impractical idealist". Between them and their associates they gave the Winnipeg of the 1930's an air somewhat like that which must have hovered over Muddy York when that little community had to contain William Lyon Mackenzie, Egerton Ryerson, John Strachan and Robert Baldwin.

IV

PROVINCE, REGION AND "BETTER HALF"

Every one is more or less self-centred and no one more so than the inhabitant of a large city. Winnipeg never hid Ottawa from my sight but it completely obscured Toronto, and Vancouver was just "somewhere out west". The city could not, however, entirely conceal from me the region of which it was the historic centre, that is, the prairies — though I must say that it apparently could do so with those who ought to have been able to see farther. Once I said to one of my classes, intending to illustrate a point, "Now, I suppose it is unnecessary to ask what the basis of life here in Winnipeg is; the source, direct or indirect, of the livelihood of us all." I found that it was necessary to ask, that few individuals in that class knew that we all lived on wheat. That is ordinary metropolitan psychology, and it provokes the same distrust and heart-burning in the countryside of Manitoba as it does in every other countryside. During the Depression, the gulf between urban and rural was accentuated by hardship. The country people did not suffer from lack of food but they just had no cash, whereas they could all see, if they walked along Wellington Crescent, that Winnipeggers were, as the phrase goes, "rolling in it"! In the University, the numbers of country students were cut down to the vanishing point. The Depression made the University of Manitoba an urban university, and this in itself widened the gulf. When John Bracken became premier, he was supposed to be a farmers' premier, but the pressure of circumstances soon made it necessary for him to give as much attention to city as to country.

When in the early thirties things were unbelievably bad in the city and the province itself was threatened by the eastern banks, Bracken managed to secure the building of Memorial Hall as a relief measure. Shortly after that building was opened, two meetings were held there of several thousand persons each. One was addressed by Rev. Dr. Shields, breathing fire and slaughter in all directions. The audience was respectable lower middle-class, a class that supported Stevens' Reconstructionism and in Germany was said to have supported Nazi-ism. The other was addressed by Tim Buck, fresh from having been shot at and missed in Kingston Penitentiary. The audience was working class and North End. Both were typical. There were no disturbances at either. Winnipeg was a tolerant city, even though echoes of The Strike were still loud.

One pleasant point I always found about every member of the Manitoba governing bodies, from premier down to janitor, was their approachability and friendliness. This stood in sharp contrast to the arrogance that one often encountered in Queen's Park. It was possibly a by-product of the smallness of the province, but more so, I think, one of the human phenomena that one encounters in a new country. In my days in Manitoba, the bad old days of scandal were already well in the past and I never heard an accusation of even minor dishonesty made against the Bracken administration. They were an exceedingly industrious, hard-working lot of men and, as far as I could make out, the province under John Bracken enjoyed honest and competent, though not exactly inspired, government.

I first crossed the Prairies by road in 1931. Going across the bad lands of southern Saskatchewan, I encountered a man plowing with his tractor. He had the headlights on and within twenty-five yards he had been swallowed up in the dust. After that year, things got worse. For Saskatchewan, 1937 was the climax. The lands of the province were wrecked. It looked as if an invading army had passed through its fields and villages. Had it not been for the relief supplies sent by the Protestant churches of the east, a huge calamity would have ensued. Apart from the churches and their immediate membership, the east did not understand. Many a refugee carried bitterness in his heart as he left the homestead he had spent years to make, irrationally blaming "the east". That did not make for national unity. Yet those who would have rubbed salt in the wounds and stirred up violence made remarkably little progress. At the time of the Regina riots, word used to be bandied about that General MacBrien of the R.C.M.P. had phoned almost hourly to Regina for news of the revolution he was convinced was about to break out. But no revolution broke out. The people came through. Their deep tradition of self-help and self-government stood the stress put on it.

"The prairie girls are wonderful", said a friend of mine a little later when she found herself in the Air Service alongside them.

The prairie girls were wonderful. The prairie people were wonderful. I could go on chatting indefinitely but can I end my little piece on a better note? The prairie girls were wonderful!