

**A million copies: George Brown's Canadian history school texts as *de facto*
National History Textbooks, 1942-1966**

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Historical Association,
Winnipeg, 3 June 2004

by

José E. Igartua

Département d'histoire

Université du Québec à Montréal

C.P. 8888, succ. Centre-ville

Montréal, QC

H3C 3P8

igartua.jose@uqam.ca

[oral presentation version]

University of Toronto historian George Brown was Canada's foremost Canadian history textbook writer for Canadian primary and secondary schools from the 1940s to the end of the 1960s. Brown's texts dominated the Canadian market. They were used in great numbers throughout English-speaking Canada: his *Story of Canada* Grade 5 text is reputed to have sold over a million copies throughout the English-speaking provinces, while his high school text went through numerous reprints and was approved in many provinces. Brown's texts came as close as Canadian circumstances permitted to a single "national" history text: while each provincial department of education was free to approve any text it liked, the economics of the Canadian textbook trade forced publishers to shape their offerings to the requirements of the Ontario Department of Education, their largest market. As a result, other provinces had little choice but to adopt texts written to meet Ontario Department of Education requirements. Brown's was the most popular of the Ontario texts.

The Ontario Department of Education curriculum guidelines viewed Canada as a British nation in tradition and in population. The curriculum was premised on a concept of a collective "We" British in origin, tradition, and culture, that had to be transmitted to Ontario's children. Such a perspective inevitably defined the non-British components of the Canadian population – Natives, French Canadians, and immigrants – as "Others" that were depicted as "different."

Brown's texts supplied English-speaking Canadian pupils with the "approved" view of Canadian history that they were expected to learn. I argue that Brown's account of Canadian history evolved to some degree during these years, but that by and large his texts served up ethnic stereotypes more than it challenged them.

Trained at Chicago, George Williams Brown began his lifelong association with the University of Toronto in 1925. He edited the *Canadian Historical Review* from 1930 to 1946 and was the general editor of the University of Toronto Press from 1945 to 1953. Brown would be better known for his texts than for his scholarly publications. In his presidential address to the CHA in 1944, Brown insisted on Canada as a "delicate balancing of diverse forces and problems. She has had to face at one and the same time the baffling difficulties of geography and sectionalism, the necessity of developing and harmonizing two types of culture, and the problem of reaching political maturity within a complex and rapidly changing network of external relations." The most persistent of the balancing acts that defined Canada was "survival within the Canadian framework of two cultures, French and English," what some Canadians "consider their so-called racial problem (which is in reality not a racial problem at all)." But Brown's insistence upon the centrality of national tensions in Canadian history did not permeate his textbooks. In writing his high school text, Brown had to bend his view of Canadian history to the requirements of the Ontario Department of Education. The *Courses of Study for Grades IX and X: Social Studies, History*, taken from Circular H.S. 8 of the Ontario Ministry of Education, "suggested" a number of objectives for the course on Canadian history and citizenship. Among these were "to show how Canada's history is linked with that of the Empire and related to that of other parts of the world;" "to lead the pupil to see that he has duties and responsibilities towards his family, his school, his community, his province, the Dominion of Canada and the British Empire;" and "to promote tolerance, respect, and goodwill towards other races and classes." The pupil was thus assumed to be male, English-speaking, and of British origin. The actual contents proposed for the Grade 10 course put the emphasis on Ontario and the West; Lower Canada was accorded only a brief treatment, as were the Maritime provinces. The Ontario curriculum prescribed what were then uncontroversial topics of territorial appropriation and constitutional development. Apart from some unfortunate political

tensions, Canadian history, in the perspective of the Ontario curriculum, was a conflict-free progression from colony to nation within the comfortable orb of the British Empire. The curriculum made little room for what Brown had termed in his 1944 presidential address the "central fact" of Canadian history: relations between the French and English populations of the country.

In the main, Brown, like other textbook writers, stuck to the prescribed framework. Brown's Grade 10 text, *Building the Canadian Nation*, was first published in 1942; it was reprinted with additional text on the contemporary period in 1946 and 1951, and lightly reworded in 1958. Its title page indicated that the text was authorized in the schools of Ontario and Manitoba; it was eventually used in all provinces, save perhaps PEI and BC. There was little evidence in the first edition of Brown's high school text of any attempt to focus on the "central fact in Canadian history" that had been "overlooked," as he had asserted in his 1944 CHA presidential address. The table of contents revealed a fairly close adherence to the prescriptions of the Ontario Ministry of Education. Brown's very brief presentation of "America's Native Peoples" in the chapter on the geography of North America focused on the diversity of the material environment and of native material culture, recognized the natives' "cleverness in making use of their resources" and acknowledged that "the coming of the white man was a violent shock to the Indian's way of living." But there was practically no description of native social organization. Brown explained how missionaries had a "real problem" in trying to "understand the Indians:" on the one hand, missionaries admired the Natives' bravery, unselfishness, endurance, and hospitality; on the other, "the Indian was attached to his superstitions, to his belief in magic, to his feasts and ceremonials which were often no better than wild orgies." But this ambivalent picture later gives way to a portrayal of the Iroquois as the enemy. The Iroquois, who were "democratic in some ways," possessed qualities of "daring,

cunning, and determination which surpassed anything among their neighbours" and made them all the more fearsome for the inhabitants of New France. But soon the Natives would disappear from the narrative, and with the arrival of the Loyalists, "new settlements sprang into existence ... on lands which had never previously been occupied, except by Indians."

Brown's chapter on "Homes and Peoples" in New France rehearsed well-worn stereotypes of French Canadians as *primitifs décontractés* and New France as a sort of historical theme park. "The voyageurs had a good humour which was never far below the surface. With their rollicking songs, their endless fund of stories, their gaily painted canoes, and their skill in forest life they were a type of Frenchman completely weaned away from the life of Europe." The habitant was "cheery, high spirited and very fond of sociability." "His songs by dozens he had brought from France and he sang them everywhere.... The habitant had few ambitions but he enjoyed life. His interests centred around his family and his church. He knew and thought little of the outside world. His home was in Canada and he loved the land on which he lived. This was his strength." Brown's description of the Acadians was also grounded in stereotypes. Acadians were "a care-free, pious, and self-reliant people, devoted to their religion and their homes, knowing little of the outside world and wishing only to be left alone."

According to Brown, New France was but the prelude to Canadian history. If Canada had always been a land of pioneers, some pioneers were better than others. Brown waxed lyrical about the Loyalists. "No story of pioneer courage in Canada's history is more stirring than that of the early Loyalist settlements." Indeed, "many of their descendants have shown the same high qualities of leadership, and it is no wonder that the Loyalist tradition has left in Canada an indelible impression."

Brown presented Lower Canadian politics leading to the Lower Canadian rebellion as "in part a conflict between French and English," the former, unlike the

British, "not interested in commerce." The political issues leading to the Rebellion were cast in ethnic terms. Ethnic weaknesses on both sides were to blame for the Rebellion. In Brown's account, the Rebellions appear as an unfortunate departure from the fundamental Canadian virtues of moderation and compromise. Yet these were difficult virtues to practise between nations of unequal genius. Brown's paternalistic view of French Canadians was clear. He agreed with Durham's views of French Canadians, and only disagreed with Durham's underestimation of their resolve to maintain their culture. Baldwin's and LaFontaine's political partnership would constitute "one of the finest chapters in the history of Canadian public life" because LaFontaine had shown that "he and his followers were worthy of responsibility." The French Canadians had elevated themselves, as Durham had proposed, to the level of British "worthiness."

The question of "worthiness" did not arise for English Canadians, but it was implicitly raised again for French Canadians in Brown's description of the conscription crisis of World War I. French Canadians "for generations ... had been almost completely isolated from Europe, and were far less in touch with world affairs than were the majority of English-speaking Canadians." Brown concluded his presentation of Canadian history by insisting that "differences of race have beset it at every turn," but he closed on an optimistic note: "As a country with two main groups, French and English, and representatives from many other lands, she may be able to contribute something in solving the world's problems of language and race which are becoming increasingly difficult."

In 1958 Brown offered a new edition, "completely revised and reset," of *Building the Canadian Nation*. It enjoyed much success: by 1966, it had had eight printings. But the revision was far less extensive than claimed: Brown kept much of the structure of the 1942 edition and made essentially cosmetic changes. The first chapter included added

material to introduce contemporary Canada and define the nature of the country. These new pages stressed that the "most striking fact" about the Canadian people was that "there are two main groups which together founded the country – the French- and English-speaking. Canada is thus a *bicultural* country," a peculiarity of Canada in the American hemisphere. Brown contrasted the continuity of French Canada's cultural unity with the variety of the "culture of English-speaking Canada," which included "German, Ukrainian, Dutch, and many other elements;" this variety would "in the end add much to Canadian life." The text thus offered a nebulous conflation of bicultural and multicultural views of Canada.

To bolster his presentation of Canada as a bicultural country, Brown inserted in the chapter covering the years 1763 to 1774 a part entitled "The Perplexing Problems of Quebec" in which he stressed that "the conquest had been a terrible shock, and if we are to understand Canada's history since that time we must realize what this meant," namely "the problem of 'survival' – *la survivance*." Brown acknowledged that, with the introduction of the parliamentary system of government in 1791, "French Canada began to develop its own political leaders who showed that they could learn the game of parliamentary politics as well as anyone" and did not need "training" in the art of self-government, as had been suggested in the original edition. Similarly, the interpretation of the rebellions was slightly amended to stress the similarities between the motives of the Upper Canadian and Lower Canadian rebels. French Canadians were no longer simply uninterested in commerce; they opposed the British merchants' plans to raise taxes to build canals, because they "were more interested in such things as roads" and, "like Mackenzie's supporters in Upper Canada, they objected to taxes for large schemes like canals." And the statement of agreement with Durham's view of French Canada that had appeared in the original edition was removed. Unlike the original edition, the revised edition made mention of

Riel's hanging, "the signal for a conflict which was soon flaring up like a forest fire" and which would leave "scars for decades." Altogether these changes amounted to minor but revealing modifications to the story established in 1942. Essentially, however, high school readers of Brown's text, well into the 1960s, were presented with a view of Canadian history grounded in the historical scholarship of the 1920s.

In 1959, the Ontario Department of Education issued new curriculum directives that would shape Canadian history textbooks published for the English-Canadian high school market in the 1960s. The new guidelines provided for an examination of Canadian history spread over three years. Grade 7 students were to learn about Canada from "the first arrival of Europeans" to 1800. The story was continued from 1800 to 1900 in Grade 8. Twentieth-century Canadian history was assigned to Grade 10. In between, Grade 9 students were to learn about British history. On the whole, however, the Grade 7 curriculum continued to consist of the political and military history of New France, Quebec, and of the creation of Upper and Lower Canada. The accent in the New France part of the story was still on explorers, missionaries, governors and intendants. Heroes such as Dollard des Ormeaux and Madeleine de Verchères were mentioned explicitly, but eighteenth-century New France was ignored; no mention was made of social or economic aspects of its history. The Grade 8 curriculum was more attuned to social and economic history, at least in its treatment of Upper Canada. Much time was to be spent on Loyalist settlements and the various immigrant settlement areas in Upper Canada. More attention was given to the Upper Canadian than the Lower Canadian rebellion. The curriculum basically ignored the Atlantic Provinces and British Columbia. The geographic coverage of this new curriculum was in fact narrower than the 1950s curriculum had been.

Brown's texts for Grades 7 and 8 may be seen as representative of the new batch of history textbooks for the 1960s. Brown in 1960 co-authored a two-volume, expanded version of this text for Grades 7 and 8. The tone as well as the scope of this new text was much changed from the 1950 Grade 5 text. The chapter on "The First 'North American'" was a much expanded view of the variety of native cultures in North America. Besides presenting a substantial description of the differences between native societies in the territory of contemporary Canada, it included a presentation of the more complex native societies of North America: the Pueblos, the Aztecs and the Mayas. The Aztecs were introduced as "the most highly civilized Indians that the white man found on this continent." The Iroquois were no longer labelled a "scourge" and the natives whom the New Brunswick Loyalists encountered were "not hostile," though they are referred to as "savages" in the same sentence. The "story" of Pontiac's conspiracy offered an ambiguous assessment of the Native leader, "probably the cleverest and at the same time the most treacherous Indian leader in Canadian history."

Most of the contents of *Canada in North America to 1800* for the period before 1763 still stressed the stories of "discovery" and explorations. The text offered little discussion of life in New France and none of the *Canadiens* after 1763. The Acadians were depicted as a bucolic people who "lived very much by themselves, untroubled by the outside world." The post-1763 chapters presented the harshness of pioneer life among the Loyalists, but did not exaggerate their virtues. Throughout the book's treatment of pre-1800 Canadian history, the ethnic stereotypes evidenced in Brown's 1950s texts had been attenuated, but not completely eliminated.

The second volume in the set, *Canada in North America 1800-1901*, had somewhat less ethnic stereotyping. Still, the pages on Lower Canada asserted that "life on the farms of the old seigneuries continued much as it had been in the days of the

French régime" and did not warrant further mention. The opposition between the economic interests of the British mercantile group of Lower Canada and the French-Canadian majority was cast in terms of tax issues and British immigration. French-Canadian opposition to the British mercantile project was presented as "natural." The characterisation of merchants as "innovative" and French Canadians as "not interested in commerce" that had been conveyed in the 1942 high school text was dropped but Brown's survey of the British American colonies in 1844, retold from a traveller's account, described the habitants as "a contented and likeable race of people." These passages are about the only treatment of French Canadians in the book and express a somewhat less negative stereotypical view than that found in the 1950 text.

Canada in North America 1800-1901 did not dwell on contentious issues such as the Upper and Lower Canadian rebellions or the Red River and North-West rebellions. No details of the battles were provided, nor of the repression which followed. Riel's hanging was mentioned, but not the violent political aftermath it provoked in Quebec and Ontario. The Red River Métis were said to have had "no right" to set up a provisional government in 1869, "even though there was no other government in the [Red River] country at the time." The execution of Thomas Scott "made the people of Canada very angry" without indication of which people and for what reason.

After learning about the material culture of the resourceful pioneers in Upper Canada, the young reader of this volume would retain a rather cheerful view of Canadian history in the nineteenth century. She would read about immigrants from the "Old Country," but also of the Mennonites around Waterloo and of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe in the 1890s, few of which "could speak English when they arrived. But they were hard-working folk, and often experienced farmers." Yet the

reader would encounter practically no Natives, except for the brave Tecumseh. These "Others" – French Canadians, immigrants of non-British origins, Natives – were thus depicted in a rather positive light, but only as interesting vignettes little connected to the main story. They remained "Others."

From the 1940s to the 1960s, Brown's school texts largely described the peoples of Canada by means of stereotypes, whether they were British (valiant and hard-working), French Canadians (sociable, conservative, happy peasants), Acadians (an unfortunate people), immigrants (stalwart peasants), or First Nations (ingenious, but treacherous 'savages'). The stereotypes became less pronounced in the later works, but they remained the essential pedagogical device to introduce English-speaking schoolchildren to Canadians with a different cultural tradition. The 'Us' implicit in these depictions of 'Others' in Canadian society was predicated upon an Ontario-centred British tradition and culture which was the lot of increasingly fewer schoolchildren in Canada by the 1960s. The Ontario textbooks of the 1950s and 1960s offered little material with which to help schoolchildren understand Canadian social, political, and cultural transformations in the 1960s.

The end of the 1960s saw the waning of the very concept of the textbook as repository of common cultural knowledge. To those who would see it resurrected in a single text, the story of Brown's texts may give pause: a common textbook – for that was essentially what Brown's texts were from the 1940s to the end of the 1960s – provided no solution to the "unity" question in Canada. In fact, by spreading stereotypes and making some Canadians into "Others," it may be argued that Brown's texts contributed rather to hinder the finding of common grounds among Canada's peoples.