# A RIVER WITH ATTITUDE: *THE EMPIRE OF THE ST. LAWRENCE*, DONALD CREIGHTON, AND THE HISTORY OF CANADA

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"This book is a study in commerce and politics." The sober announcement that opens *The Empire of the St. Lawrence*[1] does not ring in our ears like a call to revolution. But in its way it was.

When *The Empire of the St. Lawrence* first appeared in 1937, Donald G. Creighton had been teaching history at the University of Toronto for a decade. He was thirty-five, with educational credentials from the University of Toronto and Oxford. Before this book, he had published little, but he had been learning steadily.[2]

Lack of means for frequent travel to Europe had first turned Creighton from European to domestic subjects but, having made the switch, he found the 1920s and 1930s a time of intellectual ferment in Canadian historical studies. The country's universities for the first time employed at least a handful of trained historians of Canada (even though, as Creighton said, the lack of opportunities for publication meant that it remained "an act of faith to begin a history book"), and Canada's archives had amassed substantial collections to challenge their skills. The historians whom Donald Creighton began joining at the Public Archives of Canada in Ottawa in the summers of the 1930s had a sense of new professionalism, an awareness of new sources to explore – and also an orthodoxy against which to react.

The orthodox version of Canadian history, *circa* 1930, still emphasized the story of government, and particularly the evolution of freedom and national sovereignty in Canada. But when Creighton began looking into the papers of the advisers to Governor General Dalhousie in the 1820s, he soon concluded that what had preoccupied them was not the administration of government. They seemed to him much more engrossed with the swirl of commerce and the challenge of defending an economic system the size of a subcontinent. Their emphasis on

business rather than on government was appropriate, Creighton decided, and out of that judgment he drew large conclusions. The lesson that Creighton banged home in this book was that constitutional struggle was not where the heart of Canadian history lay. By putting politics firmly in the context of "commerce," Creighton was announcing a new Canadian history.

*The Empire of the St. Lawrence* argued that Canadian history had to be rooted in economics and geography and that Canada belonged to those who mastered both. Its early pages salute the merchants of New France, who had first built a trading empire based on the water routes of the mighty drainage basin of the St. Lawrence. They made Montreal the centre of a trade in furs that stretched from the deep interior of the American continent to Europe. After the Conquest, British merchants took up the same project. They substituted London for Paris as their European source of finance and markets. Eventually they would add timber and wheat to furs, but they were responding to the same geography and the same opportunities as their predecessors. "The Conquest could not change Canada," writes Creighton, because the northern landscape propelled the most dynamic of French and British Canadians to build similar commercial empires.

As economics, this argument was not entirely new. W. A. Mackintosh and Harold Adams Innis had already developed the fundamentals of Canadian staples economics. (Innis would become a particular friend and mentor to Creighton, although Creighton liked to stress that he had found the basic elements of his interpretation in the documentary sources before he came to know Innis well.) The "staples" theory argues that Canadian economic development is best explained as a process by which a few "staple" resources such as furs, timber, and wheat, produced domestically with the help of overseas capital, were exported in bulk to overseas markets. Although in the twentieth century staples production ceased to be the defining characteristic of the Canadian economy, the theory continues to be an important explanation of Canadian economic development from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century.

Still, as Creighton said, his theme was commerce *and politics*. His originality lay in integrating economic insights into a richly elaborated interpretation of the history of Canada. Creighton was *not* saying that east–west economic ties were an inevitable aspect of Canada.

In his story, geography made the commercial empire of the St. Lawrence possible but did not make it inevitable. This was an empire that had to be built and protected, politically as well as commercially, against internal as well as external threats. Creighton's theme, therefore, was the struggle of Canadian visionaries, those who understood the potential of the St. Lawrence, to build and maintain a Laurentian commercial empire despite the efforts of North American rivals and petty naysayers both at home and in Britain.

This book's conclusion about that struggle is bleak. At its end, the naysayers are triumphant. They bring down the mercantile policies based on the river trade. With its territory divided, its development neglected, and its borders undefended, the commercial empire of the St. Lawrence collapses. When this book ends about 1850, Creighton declares Canada to be already caught hopelessly in the orbit of the rival American system.

Later, Creighton said that when he wrote *The Empire of the St. Lawrence*, he had little interest in the Confederation and post-Confederation eras of Canadian history. After this book was published, he moved on to a study of those times – and soon identified in them a triumphant resurgence of the Laurentian system. In his two-volume biography of John A. Macdonald, Creighton made an important revision to the thesis set out in *The Empire of the St. Lawrence*.[3]

In *Macdonald* (published in 1952 and 1955), Creighton presented the revival of the Laurentian system. Confederation provided political unity for the northern half of North America. The National Policy of tariff protection restored an economic barrier along the border. Although Montreal's old control of trade into the American territories south of the Great Lakes was gone, railroads enabled the Laurentian trading zone to reach across British North America right to the Pacific. Where *The Empire of the St. Lawrence* had chronicled the defeat and humiliation of the mercantile visionaries of Montreal, Creighton's later work saw them posthumously avenged, their aspirations fulfilled by a visionary statesman from Kingston, John A. Macdonald. The long-postponed decline of Macdonald's Laurentian empire would become the subject of a 1969 article by Creighton, "The Decline and Fall of the Empire of the St. Lawrence," and of one of his later books, *Canada's First Century*. Both works relocate the end of the Laurentian system out of the era of William Lyon Mackenzie and

into that of his grandson, Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King.[4]

The great theme of building a Canadian economic and political space, in other words, was one that Creighton would continue to develop throughout his long career. Nevertheless, his first statement of it, in *The Empire of the St. Lawrence,* announced a new moment in Canadian historical writing. In the 1930s, Creighton was not alone in seeking to ground Canadian history in economics and geography. But *The Empire of the St. Lawrence* was unparalleled in the force of its demonstration that narratives rooted only in politics could no longer be taken seriously in Canadian history.

Creighton's biography of Macdonald would expand the Laurentian thesis, confirming its interpretive power by spreading its reach in both time and space. It would also soften and humanize the Laurentian vision. The hero of *Macdonald*, after all, is a person, one who dominated the public stage in Canada for nearly half a century. *Macdonald* made the triumph of the Laurentian system a triumph of personality, as John A. Macdonald surmounts every challenge to build a nation worthy of the Laurentian legacy. In *Macdonald*, Creighton displays a man as great as the river.

By contrast, the Montreal merchants in *The Empire of the St. Lawrence* scarcely register as personalities at all. Peter McGill, Alexander Henry, and "the Marquis," Simon McTavish, are like-minded to the point of being interchangeable. None of them displays half the personality that Creighton gives to the river itself. The river "knew its landscape." It "groped" and "grasped," it "commanded," and "aggressively it entrenched" itself. Or it "idled along, unhurried, controlled, manoeuvring its vast bulk with a practised dexterity." Always, it "cared not whether it was valued or neglected." This was a river with attitude.

The anonymity of the people and the omnipresence of the river in *The Empire of the St. Lawrence* allow the Laurentian thesis to come through in all its austere power. This book, more clearly than its successors, does not just put politics – the whole human realm, indeed – in the context of commerce. It actually removes much of the deep political meaning from Canadian political history.

There is no ideology in the Canadian politics that Creighton describes in this book. There is only the river empire. The merchants are colourless to the point of anonymity, but they support the river

empire, and therefore Creighton declares that they had "the only significant political philosophy which existed at that time in Canada." No one else's views matter.

In all the phases of Creighton's Laurentian argument, there was a right answer to Canadian development – and the heroes of the story were those who saw it and acted on it. Unlike John A. Macdonald, the Montreal merchants had little aptitude for political campaigning and little success at it. They held few political interests or principles beyond their business, and Creighton emphasizes how they mixed free-trade and protectionist views with little regard for consistency or principle. Yet, with all these shortcomings, the merchants supported the development of the St. Lawrence, and so Creighton tells us that they had the right answer to Canadian history.

Their rivals, by contrast, had no answer at all. They were "rural and parochial," Creighton tells us. They represented only agrarian protest. If their leaders did not come from "the heart of agrarian discontent," then they were "a raffish crew of mercurial adventurers" (Upper Canadian critics before 1812). Or they were "bovine" and barnacle-like (Robert Baldwin). Or they sought only to preserve "osseous" feudalism (the francophone leadership in Lower Canada, and particularly Louis-Joseph Papineau). They might quote democratic theory, but in truth they represented only "the frontier and semi-feudal agriculture of the Canadas." Taken all together, they offered nothing but blind opposition to the Laurentian vision. With the fervour of a young scholar with a bold new theory, Creighton dismisses them all with the same disdain that he shows to those who signed petitions with "those not infrequent crosses by which the French Canadians were accustomed to signify their mature intellectual convictions."

In 1937, Creighton's emphasis on the meaningless negativism of the enemies of the Laurentian vision – and on the irrelevance of any Canadian ideology other than development of the Laurentian system – was perhaps the most radical new element of *The Empire of the St. Lawrence*. It has also been part of the book's enduring legacy.

Before Creighton, Canadian historians had treated the ideological debates of early Canadian politics with high seriousness and great respect. For George Wrong, O.D. Skelton, and other leading historians and textbook writers of the era that Creighton helped bring to an end, the struggle between reform ideology and colonial conservatism had

been the core of Canadian history from the 1790s to the 1920s. For them, the debates that set political rights, self-government, and national sovereignty against autocracy and colonialism expressed the most important themes of historical narrative. The leading figures in those debates, particularly reform-oriented politicians from the Baldwins to Laurier (and even Laurier's self-proclaimed heir, Mackenzie King), were venerated by the older historians as visionaries of freedom and national independence.

These were the people Creighton mocked and dismissed. In the old interpretation, responsible government, the hard-won achievement of Canadian parliamentary democracy in 1848, was the crucial assertion of the sovereign power of the Canadian people to control their own national destiny. Responsible government had become the defining moment of Canadian history. In this book Creighton confronted that tradition directly. He declared that in the light of the Laurentian thesis, responsible government "loses significance as a separate political achievement." It was "a benevolent formality," nothing more. Creighton had ejected the political reformers, the heroes of what he called "the grit interpretation," from their once-central place in Canadian history. He had replaced them with the tory entrepreneurs and their political allies who built the commercial empire of the St. Lawrence into a continent-spanning Canadian system through centralized authority and visionary leadership.

As a reaction to a smug, complacent tradition that was unable to see in Canadian history anything but a smooth constitutional evolution to ever-greater freedom, *The Empire of the St. Lawrence* performed a powerful and valuable corrective. It introduced a richly elaborated interpretation, which deposed constitutional politics and argued that geography, economics, socio-economic rivalries, and raw power were the decisive factors in the shaping of Canada.

Later, during the 1950s and 1960s, Creighton and his allies would establish this judgment as the dominant interpretation of Canadian history. Creighton's view that the foundations of the Canadian state were pragmatic, its key actors devoid of any philosophy beyond economic development, continues to be reflected in our texts in history, political science, and constitutional law. Creighton's critics, as much as his defenders, have accepted his argument that Canada was founded on colonial deference, economic power, centralized authority,

aphilosophical deal-making, and fear of democracy as an alien and American threat. The failed radical tradition of 1837 has always attracted some admirers and defenders, but the remarkably successful reform tradition of the mid-nineteenth century has come to be dismissed as a superficial, sanctimonious fraud. As the political scientist Alan Cairns has written, the nineteenth-century Canadian tradition of responsible government and parliamentary democracy has been dismissed and ignored for so long that it has become "the constitutional world we have lost."[5]

Creighton's declaration that nineteenth-century Canadian discourse about rights and liberties and parliamentary representation was merely so much theoretical palaver has been tremendously influential. Yet surely it is a caricature. There were large and significant political issues, beyond the needs of the river empire, that had to be addressed in nineteenth-century Canada. Those who asserted the rights of legislatures in Upper and Lower Canada and the Atlantic colonies, and those who insisted that governors and governments had to be made responsible to the people's elected representatives, were expressing neither rural idiocy nor predetermined class antagonism. When they succeeded in undermining the autocratic policy-making process preferred by Montreal's mercantile elite, they were not merely destructive naysayers. Their political reforms, which Creighton treats here as superficial formalities, revitalized and legitimized Canadian government. In the years before and after Confederation, in fact, the voting blocs that he scorns as feudalist and agrarian became keystone constituencies in support of the rebuilding and expansion of the Laurentian political economy.[6]

At the start of the twenty-first century, debates about the nature of good government, about democracy, regional accommodation, and forms of political representation – the great classical issues of political thought – are once more germane to Canadian political and social debates. These are subjects that were largely expunged from the discourse of Canadian political history by the triumph of Creighton's Laurentian thesis and its emphasis on economic growth as the essential element of Canadian history. The principal subject of *The Empire of the St. Lawrence*, the political economy associated with the export of furs and timber to Europe, grew remote in the course of the twentieth century, as Canada evolved a different kind of political economy. But

the book's deeper message, that Canadian history is more about power, leadership, and economic development than about substantial political ideas of any kind, continues to thrive. The scarcity of significant new work on Canadian political ideas, the lack of historical references in our constitutional and political discussions, and perhaps even the ease with which political history has been displaced by social history and other forms of inquiry all testify to the force and persuasiveness of the line of interpretation that this book did so much to launch.[7]

*The Empire of the St. Lawrence* announced the emergence of a great historian. It broke new paths with its powerful assertion that Canadian history was far richer than merely a series of constitutional reshufflings. It demonstrated that attention to the influences of geography, economics, class, and power could take historians much deeper into the Canadian past than attention to high politics alone. There is a great achievement of reading and thinking and writing in these pages. If the vigour of its argument has diverted many readers from attending to elements of Canadian history *other* than the river empire and the politics inspired by it, that is perhaps a natural consequence of its originality and a proof of its importance.

Peter Waite and others who studied with Donald Creighton have described his sometimes intimidating fierceness, but they also stress his respect for contrary viewpoints when they were vigorously expressed and well supported by evidence. Creighton's fierceness comes through in this book. Nevertheless *The Empire of the St. Lawrence* deserves republication more than sixty years after its first appearance, not as a monument to intimidate us, but as an argument to read, to engage with, to argue with. That it still deserves to be engaged confirms the merits of the book – and the author.

## NOTES

1. It was called *The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence* when Ryerson Press first published it in 1937. The book received its shorter title, evidently with Creighton's consent, when Macmillan of Canada republished it in 1956. In later references to his book, Creighton most often used the shorter title.

2. Peter Waite, a student of Creighton's who became his fellow scholar of Confederation, describes Creighton's education and career in the introduction

to the recent one-volume paperback reprint, Donald Creighton, *John A. Macdonald: The Young Politician; The Old Chieftain*, first pub. 1952, 1955 (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1998).

3. Creighton reports his late-emerging interest in Confederation-era issues in *The Passionate Observer: Selected Writings* (Toronto, Macmillan of Canada, 1980), p. 192. A key transitional work between *Empire of the St. Lawrence* and *Macdonald* was the report that Creighton did for the Rowell–Sirois Commission, published in 1939 as "British North America at Confederation."

4. Creighton, "The Decline and Fall of the Empire of the St. Lawrence," in Canadian Historical Association, *Annual Report 1969* (Ottawa, Canadian Historical Association, 1970), and *Canada's First Century* (Toronto, Macmillan of Canada, 1970).

5. Alan C. Cairns, "The Constitutional World We Have Lost," in C.E.S. Franks et al., eds., *Canada's Century: Governance in a Maturing Society: Essays in Honour of John Meisel* (Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), pp. 42–67.

6. In one of his first approaches to the Laurentian thesis, a 1933 article called "The Commercial Class in Canadian Politics, 1792–1840," Creighton suggested that the political initiatives of the reformers had gone hand-in-hand with the merchants' goal of economic development, but on this point his view changed as the book progressed. The article is reprinted in Creighton, *Towards the Discovery of Canada* (Toronto, Macmillan of Canada, 1972), pp. 84–102.

7. In recent years a handful of books from outside the scholarly mainstream has begun to rehabilitate the nineteenth-century reform tradition. Some examples are John Ralston Saul, *Reflections of a Siamese Twin* (Toronto, Viking/Penguin Canada, 1997), William D. Gairdner, ed., *Canada's Founding Debates* (Toronto, Stoddart, 1999), and Christopher Moore, *1867: How the Fathers Made a Deal* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1997).

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