

## Comptes rendus — Book Reviews

Janet Ajzenstat — *The Political Thought of Lord Durham*. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988. Pp. xiv, 137.

Lord Durham's Report has endured the extremes of glorification and neglect. This decade has seen a revival of interest in it, and the book under review reflects that renewal.

Janet Ajzenstat approaches the Report as a document of modern political thought. The originality of this approach is seen in an extended comparison of the ideas of Alexis de Tocqueville and Durham's, and in her approach to the familiar questions of responsible government and assimilation. By placing the Report, or claiming to place it, in the context not of its immediate historical circumstances but of the liberal debate on tolerance since 1688, she highlights the third of these issues.

The first major area of Ajzenstat's discussion is the comparison of the Report with Alexis de Tocqueville's *De la démocratie en Amérique*. Ajzenstat declares that "in all likelihood" (22), Durham had De Tocqueville's first volume open before him as he wrote. Certainly, there was a striking similarity of ideas and even phrases. De Tocqueville was more philosophical, less optimistic, less thoroughly liberal than Durham, but Ajzenstat argues the two shared a common belief that the dominant character of society in North America would inevitably be liberal, progressive and commercial. Because it would be tolerant of all moderate forms of religion and ethnicity, that society would also ultimately be homogeneous. To neither writer, according to Ajzenstat, did race represent a particularity. Instead, she says, each depicted the "English 'race' as standing for modernity" (26-27).

On this basis, Ajzenstat proceeds to argue a strikingly different case about assimilation. While many historians have decried Durham's proposal that French Canada be anglicized as quickly as possible and puzzled over its apparent incompatibility with the farsighted liberalism shown elsewhere in the Report, Ajzenstat contends that the recommendation was not racist and that it reflected precisely the values underpinning the famous, widely applauded recommendation of responsible government. Durham, she repeats, was a universalist, typical of the mainstream of liberal thought. He believed that "particular traditions and particular loyalties must be discarded if liberal beliefs are to be disseminated and liberal justice is to prevail" (5). To sustain the French Canadian identity would condemn the French to increasing poverty. It would deny them political rights. Eventually, they would reject the very policies that sustained their nationality, opting instead for economic prosperity and full participation in a modern, liberal society. This process was already beginning in Lower Canada. In short, "nationalist divisions recognized in law deny liberal rights to minorities" (12). Ajzenstat approves of this position and recommends it as an approach to present-day problems.

This argument may appeal to critics of the Meech Lake Accord. Historically, it has less to recommend it. No amount of rationalization can obscure the fact that Durham did advocate the earliest possible anglicization of French Canada. Ajzenstat seems to me to have gotten his reasons for doing so pretty right, except that she omits chauvinism. She correctly points to the few laudatory remarks Durham made about French Canada, but she fails to appreciate the severity of his condemnations and the pride of race he himself displayed. Durham simply refused to admit the validity of the French Canadian identity. That identity, furthermore, was not for Durham a matter only of land usage and education, as Ajzenstat asserts (88). The Report makes abundantly clear that language was at the core of Durham's concept of French Canadian nationality. So too was culture. The thoroughness of the transformation he envisaged in French Canada far exceeded anything that was necessary from a purely liberal viewpoint. Furthermore, the French were to be assimilated to a broadly "English" North American civilization.

For Durham, liberalism and chauvinism were inseparable. He believed, and was not unusual in doing so, that mankind had reached its highest point in the Britain of the early nineteenth century. The leadership of the United Kingdom was the product of liberal institutions that unleashed individual initiative and promoted moral qualities that were in some vague but profound way essentially "English". To offer responsible government and assimilation to British North America at one and the same time was simply to extend to the colonies there the crucial elements — liberal institutions and "English" character — of national greatness. The efficacy of that combination had already been demonstrated in the United States — his chauvinism was Anglo-Saxon.

As far as Durham's recommendations on French Canada were concerned, liberalism was subservient to chauvinism. The Report is perfectly clear that the extension of the fullest equality of individual rights to French Canadians was to be a classic case of repressive tolerance: the polity itself was to be reformed so that the French could be dominated and assimilated without resort to *obvious* injustice. Moreover, Durham did not *need* to recommend anglicification. J.A. Roebuck, the British ultra radical and others had concluded that race was not a significant factor in Lower Canadian politics. If it is suggested that Durham might have been blinkered by the absence in liberal theory of any satisfactory notion of "consociational democracy", the answer is that he was not primarily a theoretician. He was proposing policy to be implemented in the Canadas, and there were ample precedents in the history of the Empire for taking a sympathetic attitude towards *la survivance*. Those precedents were stronger in the eighteenth century than in the nineteenth, but this simply shows that Durham was, despite Ajzenstat, a man of his time.

The argument that Durham "belongs in the camp of tolerance, not racism" (xi) is then a major overstatement and, in fact, it is so even on Ajzenstat's own showing. "Racism" is the wrong word anyway, since Durham believed that French Canadians were not inherently inferior.

Ajzenstat's other major point of focus is responsible government. She argues that Durham saw responsible government as a device by which a harmonious balance might be achieved between the various institutions of colonial government. Responsible government, she says, implied for him an increase rather than a decrease in executive power; it implied the continuation of an effective, nominated Legislative Council and the weakening of the House of Assembly, which, especially in Lower Canada, had assumed limited executive functions during the 1830s. Here, Ajzenstat stands broadly with P.A. Buckner, Gordon Stewart and other recent commentators. She differs from them in several particular ways. First, her stress on Durham's belief in constitutional balance is illuminating. It brings the conservative side of his radicalism into focus and leads to some interesting, though ultimately overdrawn, comparisons with the British philosophic radicals. She shows convincingly how much of the Report was a reply to the favourite radical demands of this period. Both here and in her discussion of assimilation, she demonstrates Durham's preoccupation with the dangers of democratic leadership.

Secondly, Ajzenstat suggests that Durham expected responsible government to result in the creation of government and opposition parties, indeed of alliances of French and English members, more or less of the type that eventuated. By contrast, Phillip A. Buckner, in *The Transition to Responsible Government* (Westport, Conn., c. 1985), had declared that Durham "did not appreciate the significance of parties nor anticipate the development of party systems in British North America" (259). In Buckner's interpretation, Durham believed that colonial politics would revolve around specific issues and ad hoc alliances. Neither author adduces evidence on this point, but I am inclined to agree with Buckner, since his view is at least consistent with the role Durham appears to have projected for the colonial governor. One of the surprising features of Ajzenstat's discussion of responsible government is her total neglect of the crucial question of the governor's role.

Thirdly, Ajzenstat argues, or appears to argue, that Durham advocated a much greater degree of colonial self-government than is generally recognized. Indeed, she implies that he may even have envisaged some form of fairly early colonial independence. In particular, she denies that he recommended a division of powers between the colonial government, which was to control internal affairs, and the imperial government, which was to control external, imperial or "reserved" matters. This argument takes up the greater part of one chapter. I can make no sense of it, bearing in mind the

historical circumstances of the 1830s and 1840s and the clear evidence of the Report in favour of the distinction between colonial and imperial powers.

In summary, there is some good material in this work. The comparison with De Tocqueville is instructive and so too, on the whole, is that with the philosophic radicals. Durham's liberalism is well explicated. However, the argument on assimilation is tendentious, and the original part of that on responsible government lacks an adequate foundation in historical understanding and evidence. The book could, in addition, have been longer. This would have allowed a more measured, comprehensive style of argument and thorough consideration of all the evidence. As it is, the presentation is frequently, on big issues as well as on small, cryptic and extremely provocative.

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Donald H. Akenson — *Small Differences: Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants, 1815-1922*. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988. Pp. xii, 149 and appendices.

This is not a great barmbrack of a book. It is a tightly argued, revisionist assault on several widely held assumptions about the Irish people in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Those familiar with Donald Akenson's writings on things Irish — this is his twelfth book — will smile wryly at the recondite term used above. It is his wont to throw in, quite regularly, words that make one dive for the dictionary — the large one — to ensure that we do not nod. It is, perhaps, a bit of mild self-indulgence, but I doubt if the puckishness could ever now be exorcized. Besides, it is fun and certainly does not vitiate this powerful argument.

In much of this recent writing (*The Irish in Ontario* being an excellent example), Akenson's enemy is the unexamined cliché. Now, in *Small Differences*, he addresses a bit of conventional wisdom more central to the Irish experience. Are cultural differences between Irish Protestants and Irish Catholics causal factors of group behaviour, especially toward each other? This, he explains, is a main theme in much of Irish historiography, especially that written by American and Irish American historians. Akenson begins with an excellent historiographical survey which illustrates the pervasive cultural determinism dominating the work of even marxist and empirical historians of Ireland, who eschew economic substructures in favour of national self-assertion. They assume a causal cultural gulf: an assumption that he sets out to demolish.

Using a myriad of sources, he examines the two communities in Ireland over a one hundred-year period according to empirical socioeconomic indicators, including occupational stratigraphy, family structure and attitudes toward women. He comes to the startling conclusion that there is very little difference between the two groups and mentions, but leaves aside, the converse conclusion that they are indeed similar. But there remain the possibilities that the indications are not entirely conclusive or that Ireland is too excited an ambience to yield reliable results. To control these possibilities, Akenson then proposes to remove his tests to what he terms "clean laboratories".

Certain preliminary factors must first be established: at the end of the nineteenth century, some 40 percent of all those born in Ireland lived outside the country, but who had perforce taken their cultural baggage with them; those who emigrated were generally representative of the total population; and Catholics and Protestants emigrated in similar proportions. He must also deal with a mountain of literature on the Irish diaspora, most of it generated in the United States, which has established a whole new set of clichés. This posits that the Irish arrived penniless and were ghettoized in the cities of the eastern seaboard; that they were technologically backward and unable to adapt to new agricultural methods; and that they lacked any entrepreneurial skills or spirit. In America, the Protestant Irish (the so-called Scotch Irish) disappeared into the majority population. Thus the Irish, in this literature, are urban, clannish, poor, backward, lethargic and Catholic.