

Comptes rendus — Book Reviews

Don Akenson — *The Orangeman. The Life and Times of Ogle Gowan*. Toronto: James Lorimer, 1986. Pp. xii, 330.

Let's begin by getting the terminology right. Don Akenson's *The Orangeman* is neither a "life and times" (the sub-title) nor a "fictional biography" (p. 316), as those terms are usually understood. It is a "fictionalized biography" (p. xii), which is to say that, although based on historical sources, it is cast in the form of fiction: the element of speculation is larger than in conventional biography and unlabelled, as in popular biography; conversations and some minor historical facts have been invented or altered; no footnotes are given, though the 'Note on Sources' is quite specific; and there is no index.

The fictionalized biography stands uneasily on the boundary between history and the novel. As the latter *The Orangeman* achieves considerable success. Akenson uses the form to dramatise action more than to develop character. His language has a rough vigour well suited to his rambunctious subject, while, particularly in the section on Gowan's Irish roots, he shows a fine sense of place and time. The limitations of the technique reveal themselves principally in the second section, which deals with Gowan's early years in Canada: there the repeated tales of violence, sex, and unreasoning conflict begin to pall, while Gowan's personality appears static, a semblance attributable to the paucity of historical sources. But the standard rises thereafter. The story becomes more varied, the pace is faster (the years 1838-76 get about the same space as 1829-38), and John A. Macdonald is strikingly linked with Gowan as a parallel and contrasting life. Above all, despite the too-frequent jarring phrase, descriptions of Gowan in decline (see especially pp. 246 and 294-6) provide the most affecting moments in the book.

As history *The Orangeman* is less happy. Much has now been written about Ogle Gowan, Canadian Orangeism, and Leeds country, not least by Akenson himself. Only in respect of Gowan's personal life does this book have anything new to say. It amounts to an incautious elaboration of what Akenson has already written about Gowan in *The Irish in Ontario* (pp. 169-196), with a section added on the period 1838-76.

Akenson's account of Gowan's personal history differs in three respects from that given by Hereward Senior (*Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, x, pp. 309-14): Gowan's illegitimacy, his general propensity for immoral and illegal conduct, and his prosecution in 1860 for child molestation. The first and last involve relatively simple matters of fact: were Gowan's parents legally married, and did Gowan have sexual contact with the twelve-year old girls in question? Akenson asserts in his 'Note on Sources' that the evidence on these points is clear — that it answers 'no' to the first and 'yes' to the second question. But the historian is left wondering, partly because fictionalized biography prevents the author from arguing for his particular interpretation, from showing how it was derived, and partly because Hereward Senior, who read the same sources, and Akenson himself have previously adopted different views.

These matters are not insignificant. Gowan's illegitimacy is central to Akenson's portrait. The division between legitimate and illegitimate children is presented as the crux of conflict within the family of John Hunter Gowan, conflict which led to legal proceedings in 1826 and 1827 over Hunter Gowan's will. The resulting disclosures, particularly those made at the Wexford Spring Assizes of 1827, haunted Ogle Gowan for the rest of his life, so much so that his public career may virtually be said to have been doomed before it began. Furthermore, illegitimacy, according to Akenson, was central to Gowan's personality: it created within him a desperate longing for respectability. 'Respectability' is loosely used. Given the variety of its meanings in the nineteenth century and Gowan's

conduct, which seems to have been designed to place every possible obstacle in the way of his achieving almost any form of respectability, the point might have been more precisely formulated. As for the child molestation, it becomes not only the agent effectively destroying Gowan's last hopes of a political career but also the culmination of a long history of sexual promiscuity and growing perversion. How much evidence there is to support the latter view, and how convincing it is, is unclear.

In general, Akenson's portrait is far more hostile to Gowan as a personality than any yet seriously advanced. Although not without attractive qualities, Gowan appears primarily as amoral, ruthless, and violent, a liar, a forger, a thief, a conspirator to defraud, and a suborner of witnesses. He was also combative and malicious. Even his great vitality declined rapidly as, in the grip of syphilis from the mid-1840s, he increasingly suffered depression, lassitude, and embitterment. There is much in this that carries conviction, but once again the picture rests on a favourable view of information emanating from Gowan's not-always-reliable enemies.

As a public figure Gowan presents a biographer with problems because, apart from his association with Orangeism, his career was episodic and of limited importance. It is also poorly served by historical sources. Akenson broadly follows existing interpretations on the Orange Lodges in Canada, but he does add some individual glosses, particularly where Gowan himself is concerned. For example, he suggests that Gowan was effectively expelled by the Irish Grand Lodge around the end of 1828 and that this expulsion was the product of public embarrassment following revelations of Gowan's irredeemably bad character. By contrast, Senior's view is that Gowan "incurred the enmity" (*DCB*, X, P 309) of the Irish Grand Lodge by attempting to continue a rival organization, the Benevolent and Loyal Orange Institution of Ireland, a body which, Akenson says, Gowan had by that stage abandoned. Thus, according to Akenson, Gowan was driven out of Ireland. According to Senior, he was attracted to Canada, probably by the prospect of organising the Orange Lodges there. Similarly, Akenson depicts Gowan as voluntarily yielding up the Grand Mastership of British North America in 1846, whereas Senior has him being deprived of the post by George Benjamin. Who is right? Only by replicating the research could one come to an informed answer to such a question.

Gowan's rise in Canadian politics owed much to his leadership of the Orange Lodges and of the growing society of mainly Irish immigrants in the back areas of Leeds country. But Gowan was greatly assisted by the central government, despite the opposition of the so-called Compact families, the Ephraim and Solomon Joneses and the Sherwoods, of Brockville. This presents problems of explanation which Akenson does not really address. He implies that R. S. Jameson made a mistake in standing for election with Gowan in 1834, and perhaps there is something in this, given Jameson's undistinguished political career. But even that view requires either that there was a significant lack of communication between the centre and the locality or, more likely, that York did not believe what it was being told about Gowan by families whose local power had rested partly on their privileged access to the provincial government. In other words, it seems likely that the rights and wrongs of Gowan's conflict with Jonas Jones and other local Tories were not as clear to contemporaries as they are to Akenson: by depicting him as almost always categorically at fault, Akenson makes it difficult to understand how Gowan achieved the influence claimed for him.

Akenson also argues that Gowan won election for Leeds in 1834 by duping the old Tories into holding back their votes till the last day of polling, their intention being then to plump for the government candidate, R. S. Jameson. This view is broadly that advanced by Elva M. Richards in 1968, and it is just as unsatisfactory now as when it was first formulated. Plumping for Jameson, if that is what they intended to do, was an entirely rational strategy for the old Tories; no intrigue by Gowan, if there was such a thing, was needed to convince them of this fact. In any case, the outcome of the election was determined not by Orange deceit but by Orange violence, as the voting figures and the subsequent parliamentary enquiry made clear.

Gowan's election of 1834 was voided, as was that of 1835. He did not get into and stay in the Assembly for any appreciable length of time till 1836. Given the controversies amongst contemporaries and historians about the general election of 1836, it would have been subjected to critical analysis at the same length as the elections of 1834 and 1835.

Gowan's role in the parliament of 1836-40 is also treated sketchily, which is a pity because that parliament is one of the most interesting Upper Canada's history. The session of 1836-7 provides a microcosm of pre-rebellion popular Toryism, and it would have been instructive had Gowan been placed accurately within its shifting alliances. The scheme for settling the clergy reserves question which Gowan introduced in April 1839 is described as radical and Romanist (p. 215). In fact it had been proposed in 1836 by the Tory member for Toronto, W. H. Draper, and had then gathered considerable support amongst Constitutionalists. Gowan's clash with Lieutenant Governor Arthur over the disbanding of the Queen's Royal Borderers was not unique — Sir Allan MacNab, for example, suffered a similar disappointment and took the same view of its causes. Finally, Gowan's adoption of responsible government in 1839 has to be seen against the background of the movement which swept Upper Canada in the wake of Lord Durham's Report. Many people who had formerly regarded responsible government as veiled treason swung over to its support. What is perhaps surprising is that a politician of Gowan's extreme views on loyalty should have joined the movement and that he should have continued to ally himself with Tories rather than Reformers.

The remainder of Gowan's political career — his role in provincial parliament in the years 1844-7 and 1859-61, his contribution to the British American League, his work in local government in the Johnstown district and in Toronto — is similarly treated. The truth seems to be that Akenson is not seriously interested in Gowan the politician and still less interested in the context within which he (Gowan) operated. Even Gowan's political ideas attract little attention — there is no analysis, for example, of the editorials of Gowan's *Brockville Statesman* or the *Toronto Patriot* of 1852-4, when the latter was under his management. Even when Gowan's political principles are described, their significance is too often unexplained.

In short, *The Orangeman* is better literature than history. The book is fun, as Akenson meant it to be, but, if it is to be taken as anything more than that, it should be read alongside the more sober and in some ways more informative account given by Hereward Senior.

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Karl Aun — *The Political Refugees: A History of the Estonians in Canada*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985. Pp. viii, 193. Maps, illustrations.

To the uninitiated, the Estonians of Canada appear to be one of the most cohesive and dynamic immigrant ethnic groups in this country. Karl Aun's book, published in the *Generations: A History of Canada's Peoples* series of the Multicultural Sector of the Secretary of State of Canada, both confirms and explodes this image. What emerges from his study is the picture of an embattled community capable of great achievements but often at the price of much intra-ethnic strife.

Although a few Estonians had settled in the Canadian West as early as the turn of the last century, the vast majority of this group's members arrived in Canada in the wake of the Second World War. They were political refugees in the strictest sense of that term, having fled their war-torn country during or after its various occupations by Soviet and German forces. In fact, the Estonians were one of Canada's first 'boat peoples': many of them had escaped from their homeland to Finland or Sweden by boat, and re-embarked after the war's end on a voyage to Canada. They were driven by a fear for their lives both times. During the war they wanted to avoid such dangers as being drafted into the service of one or the other of the occupying powers, or being accused by them of having supported the enemy. After the war they wished to get as far from Europe as possible in case of a new military conflict broke out and Sweden would be forced to deliver those who had sought refuge there to the Soviets. The dramatic circumstances of the Estonians' departure from Europe, coupled with the