

MICHEL HORN. — *The League for Social Reconstruction: Intellectual Origins of the Democratic Left in Canada, 1930-1942*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980. Pp. 270.

It is fitting that on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the League for Social Reconstruction, we should have its definitive history. Michiel Horn has produced an extensively researched, critically analysed, and carefully recorded study of this Canadian equivalent to the British Fabian Society.

The League for Social Reconstruction was the first organization of socialist intellectuals in Canada and the only one which worked out a systematic and comprehensive programme of social change. It was the brainchild of Frank Underhill, a controversial history professor at the University of Toronto, and Frank Scott, a young and iconoclastic law student at McGill University. In the depth of the Great Depression, they felt the need to form an organization of intellectuals which would offer guidance in bringing about a major reconstruction of Canadian politics and society. These men recruited a handful of dedicated academics from their respective universities who met in January of 1932 to launch the organization. The founding members (among whom were King Gordon, Eugene Forsey, David Lewis, Irene (Biss) and Graham Spry, Joe Parkinson and Eric Havelock) became the important "core group" of the League. They worked diligently to try to expand the League into a major national organization but without success. They were unable to establish branches in French Canada or in the Maritimes and had only twenty branches in the towns and cities of Ontario and the four western provinces. At the peak of its growth, its membership never reached the 1,000 mark.

Yet despite its small following, the League made a significant contribution to Canadian life, thanks to the core members. The League influenced the policy and direction of the CCF during its first decade, notably through the writing of the Regina Manifesto. It also enunciated a Canadian socialist programme that foreshadowed the main ingredients of the future Canadian welfare state. In addition, they had anticipated the major recommendation of the Rowell-Sirois Commission for a stronger federal government to deal with pressing social problems. To what extent the League had a direct bearing on that decision is debatable, but the organization did submit an important brief to the Commission. Finally, they performed the difficult task of keeping alive the *Canadian Forum*, one of the best journals of political and social commentary in the thirties, at a time when it could count on little intellectual support and even less financial assistance.

The League lasted a decade before disappearing amidst World War II as quietly as it had come into existence. Its fate was the result of a loss of interest on the part of many of its core members who got involved in other activities, especially the CCF; and of the fulfilment of some of their policies (the need for a highly centralized government, social welfare and renewed prosperity); and the failure of others (keeping Canada out of a second world war, and eradicating capitalism). Horn argues, however, that the League's spirit lived on in the CCF, the pages of the *Canadian Forum*, and the more humane nature of contemporary Canadian society.

Horn's book is divided into narrative chapters and analytical chapters, although the division is not clear-cut. Horn is at his best in the narrative chapters where he pieces together the story of the League. His account is factually accurate, comprehensive and well written. He highlights the personal side of the story and the major contribution of each of the core members, goes into considerable detail on the formation of the League and the endless difficulties in

publishing their book, *Social Planning for Canada*, gives a balanced account of the League's relationship with the CCF and chronicles the relentless efforts of the organization to keep Canada out of a second world war. He manages to weave together events with his own definite opinions.

There are limitations, however. One is his inability to integrate the activities of the core group with those of the branch organizations. This is made doubly difficult by the apparent lack of archival material from the branches. As a result, Horn's study is essentially about the core group; we learn little about the League beyond the ideas and activities of its leading members. This is understandable since the ideas, leadership and literature came almost exclusively from its Toronto and Montreal branches. But it does raise a question which Horn fails to consider. To what extent was the League's failure to attract many members from the hinterland a result of regional resentment towards its central Canadian domination? The League was centralist not only in its view of federalism and in its strategy for social change, but also in its organization. Did the League overlook the regional divisions of the country in concentrating too intensely on the social divisions?

A second weakness is Horn's failure to highlight sufficiently the light-hearted nature of the organization. In interviews with its members one has the impression that the League was a "fraternity" (with a few token women) whose members met frequently as much to enjoy each other's intellectual company and to exchange witticisms as to discuss the political scene and to debate the future of Canadian socialism. Horn might have emphasized the human side, and thus brought to life this dedicated and close-knit group whose surviving members still have a sense of comradeship.

Interspersed among the narrative chapters are the analytical ones: "In search of Canadian socialism", "Canada — one or nine?", "Professors in the public eye", and a concluding chapter "The LSR in Canadian history". Here Horn is more "academic" in approach, "heavier" in style, and more reserved in judgment. In the chapter on Canadian socialism, for instance, he presents a most comprehensive (at times convoluted) discussion of the League's programme as outlined in *Social Planning for Canada* and then wrestles with the difficult questions as to how uniquely "Canadian" and how "socialist" their thought was? On both questions, he presents all sides of the debate, but leaves the final judgment to the reader. Unfortunately Horn did not include a final section in which he might have attempted to place the League's socialist *ideas* in an historical context. To what extent did the League go beyond earlier intellectuals, such as the members of the Social Gospel Movement, Stephen Leacock, William Lyon Mackenzie King, or the Agrarian Reformers in their analysis of social problems? In a study with the subtitle "The intellectual origins of the Democratic Left in Canada, 1932-1940", Horn has left the ideas of the League in an intellectual vacuum.

In his overall assessment of the League in Canadian history, Horn does not exaggerate its importance. He carefully points out its accomplishments but also its limitations in both ideology and impact. Yet in "tallying up the ledger", he possibly errs on the side of being too critical, because he judges the League in "quantitative" terms only: its membership size, its direct impact on public opinion, its specific influence on the CCF, and its contribution to the *Canadian Forum*. He does not question its importance simply as an organization which advocated reform and contributed to public debate on important issues at a time which cried out for intellectual guidance. In other words, the mere presence of a group of academics who spoke out on controversial issues despite the continual fear of losing their jobs, and who devoted endless hours to the cause of social reform, was itself no

mean achievement. Horn deals with this aspect of the League in the text, but minimizes it when making his final judgment.

Despite these weaknesses, Horn's study of the League for Social Reconstruction is a major contribution to his extended work on the political, social and intellectual history of Canada in the 1930s; it is also a fine tribute to the members of the League.

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