

able to count upon a better organized and funded federal government to provide for their financial and social needs in an even longer conflict.

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NELLES, H. V. — *A Little History of Canada*. Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2004. Pp. xi, 268.

H. V. Nelles approaches this new history of Canada in an intriguing and imaginative manner. Canada, he says, is a story of transformation. Accordingly, he organizes his work around the dynamic forces of change rather than the more traditional dates we associate with other histories. “My starting and ending points [for each chapter] are not the major political events ... but rather moments of relative equilibrium when a new order has been consolidated” (p. vii).

Following this principle, Nelles divides the book into four periods, running from the first human habitation to the present. In each section he pursues the primary dynamics that reshape the land we know as Canada. In the first section he follows the development of Native communities, their interaction with the first European explorers, and the development of a permanent and relatively mature European settlement by 1740. He then looks at the transformation to a British colony by 1840, a British-based but independent Dominion by 1939, and the evolution of an independent, continentally oriented, and multicultural nation in the last part of the twentieth century. In doing so he gives us a potential new framework for interpreting Canadian history. The search for such a framework, as all Canadian historians know, has been elusive since the fragmentation of historiography in the 1960s. Viv Nelles has thus made an important and innovative contribution to the way we look at our own history.

As the title promises, this is very much a “little history”, with a text only 250 pages long, so Nelles is forced to make choices on what to include in his reinterpretation. Perhaps the greatest strength of the work is the seamless way in which he has incorporated the story of Native communities into this framework. Space is also devoted to military events, from Wolfe at Quebec, through the War of 1812, to considerable detail on World War II. (Ironically, the war that might have had the greatest impact on “transforming” Canada, World War I, receives relatively less attention.) In contrast, enthusiasts of labour history will find relatively little.

Such choices are inevitable and are also inevitably bound to raise debate among professional and amateur historians alike. More important, perhaps, are two structural issues. First, I would argue the book requires one more division. To take Canada from 1840 to 1939 as one transformation is, in my opinion, simply too much transformation. In 1840 Canada was still an overwhelmingly agricultural society, made up of separate British colonies in the east and vast fur trading territories in the west. French Canada’s place in the nation was in doubt in the wake of rebellion and Lord Durham’s assimilationist views. Responsible government, though near, had not yet been granted, and the United States was still a distrusted adversary of the mother country.

By the 1880s or 1890s the creation of the transcontinental Dominion, the partial settlement of and assertion of control over western Canada, the arrival of railways, and growing economic ties to the United States had created quite a different Canada. Indeed, the rather disappointing years from the Riel rebellion to the new prosperity at the turn of the century begs to be seen as a period of calm, albeit disappointing calm, between two quite dynamic eras.

There is another and very broad interpretive issue to be considered. On one side Nelles is writing a primer on Canadian history for a general audience. He says that he wants his book to give Canadians and travellers “a concise overview” of the basic elements of our history. On the other side, he says explicitly that this is a “personal interpretation, not a textbook” (p. ix). These comments are somewhat contradictory and reflect a degree of tension within the book. At times the work is refreshingly interpretive and has moments of rhetoric that are both iconoclastic and irreverent. The great hero Wolfe is more or less dismissed. The Winnipeg general strike “set back the organized labour movement in Canada by a generation” (p. 169). Even echoes of Creightonian distrust of the United States appear from time to time. At other times it has the characteristics of a text, covering the required facts with minimal comment, little anecdote, and fairly routine attention.

Most of all, in a personal interpretation of Canadian history, it would have been refreshing if Nelles had given us his sense of what Canada is all about. Nelles has a career of distinguished research and teaching. In these years he, like all of us, has confronted the many interpretations, myths, and clichés about our nation. We have been called the peaceable kingdom, the great multicultural experiment, the dominion of the north, and the conservative reaction to republican excess. We are cratophiles to our neighbour’s cratophobia and we are the helpful fixers, the nation that was carpentered rather than forged, and so forth. Comment on these myths and, ultimately, on what, aside from change itself, Nelles sees as the essence of Canada would have taken the author out on a limb, but it would also have added much to the history.

Broad interpretations invite broad comment. In making mine, however, I do not want the most fundamental conclusion to be missed. This book is a real success and a valuable contribution to the reworking of Canadian history.

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OLIVER, Peter (ed.) — *The Conventional Man: The Diaries of Ontario Chief Justice Robert A. Harrison, 1859–1878*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press for the Osgoode Society, 2003. Pp. xii, 644.

A social historian running across the title of this volume in a list of new acquisitions would not likely linger on it more than a second or two, just long enough to decide whether or not to suppress an incipient yawn. The cover, with its portrait of the portly diarist in full judicial regalia, quill pen poised to sign some no doubt impenetrable