

## The Art of Biography

BY AND LARGE, ACADEMIC HISTORIANS do not write biographies. But there are exceptions, like the authors under consideration here. Rusty Bittermann and Ian Ross Robertson are well-known historians of Prince Edward Island, whose earlier work focused on the Islanders' fight against landlordism.<sup>1</sup> Bittermann's biography of William Cooper, leader of the failed Escheat movement of the 1830s, and of his California-bound children, and his collective biography of female Island landlords (co-authored with Margaret McCallum) are derived from his earlier work. This is not the case with Robertson: Andrew Macphail was not a protagonist in the events depicted in his previous book. Born shortly before the demise of landlordism, he is one of the Island's famous sons. The two authors differ in their approach to biographical writing. Bittermann makes us see larger issues from the vantage point of the individuals affected by them; Robertson, on the other hand, concentrates on his subject with only occasional glimpses at the context.

Bittermann and McCallum's *Lady Landlords of Prince Edward Island* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008) looks at the landlord issue from an angle frequently overlooked: that of the landlords (who have often hitherto been reduced to one-dimensional cardboard villains), and more particularly of the female landlords (who controlled about a quarter of the Island acreage when they were bought out). The book's protagonists are four elite women: the Saunders sisters, Ann and Jane, who married respectively Robert Dundas, later Viscount Melville, and John Fane, tenth earl of Westmorland (Jane was his second wife); Jane's only daughter and heiress, Georgiana Fane; and Charlotte, daughter of Laurence Sullivan (23, 51). The latter two never married. Ann died in 1841, after the defeat of the escheat movement, and Jane in 1858, a few years after the passage of the 1853 Land Purchase Act (which provided for the voluntary sale of proprietors' land to the Island's government) (49, 77). Georgiana lived until 1874, a few months before the passage of the Land Purchase Act that forced the remaining landlords to sell, while Charlotte died in 1911 (107, 130). Charlotte's father had been one of the 12 landlords who signed the Fifteen Year Purchase Bill in 1864 by which tenants with long leases could purchase their holding for the equivalent of 15 years' rent, plus arrears back to 1858 (121-2). She, however, resisted pressures to sell until the end, and even went to court to challenge the constitutionality of the 1875 legislation (135-6). She lost, and her loss marked the definitive end of landlordism on the Island.

While the book sheds light on the motivations of some of those who resisted selling their land holdings, it is not really about lady landlords in general. Fifty-seven estates were bought under the terms of the 1875 Act; 16 of them (28 per cent) were held by women and 5 of them (9 per cent) by a husband and his wife. The female-held estates

<sup>1</sup> Rusty Bittermann, *Rural Protest on Prince Edward Island: From British Colonization to the Escheat Movement* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006); Ian Ross Robertson, *The Tenant League of Prince Edward Island, 1864-1867: Leasehold Tenure in the New World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).

comprised 29 per cent of the total acreage, since they were slightly larger than average (6,680 acres as opposed to 6,021). The four women on whom the book focuses owned significantly larger than average properties (ranging from 11,000 to 67,000 acres). In 1875, their estates were among the six largest on the Island. Why these four women were selected, how representative they may have been (of lady landlords, of absentee landlords, and of landlords who refused to sell) is never explained. The choices Georgiana and Charlotte made had an impact on the course of the resolution of the land question, but it is not obvious that they had a greater or different impact from the decisions taken by male landlords. Moreover, as we shall see below, lady landlords appear to have had less influence than their male counterparts.

The book, however, is an excellent case study of elite women's ability (or lack thereof) to manage their property at a time when the separate spheres ideology is often supposed to have reigned supreme. The Saunders sisters married, and the fate of their various assets was sealed by their marriage settlements (supervised by the Court of Chancery because they were under-age orphans benefiting from trusts at the time of their marriage). Ann appears to have enjoyed a companionate marriage; her husband entrusted her with the management of his Scottish estate as he spent most of his time in London building a political career that culminated in an extended term as First Lord of the Admiralty. They also jointly managed their financial affairs (29). Ann and Robert tried to be responsible Island landlords and invested in infrastructure on their property; however, as they resided in Great Britain, they had to rely on the services of a local agent, who was at best incompetent and at worst dishonest – a problem they shared with most absentee landlords (34–42).

Jane, headstrong, impulsive, and prone to theatrics, married the equally impulsive and wilful Earl of Westmorland, who would not even let her manage the household and, she complained, treated her as a rival. Unsurprisingly, the marriage fell apart and the couple separated. Lady Westmorland used her substantial alimony to travel and she spent a winter on the Island, where her income allowed her to make significant charitable donations for the benefit of her tenants. However, she could do absolutely nothing about the management of the estate, or the granting of leases, as her husband had acquired a life tenancy in it by virtue of their marriage settlement. Lord Westmorland died in 1841; he had granted leases on the Island that would outlive him (999 years), and he even bequeathed Jane's Island estate to their second son, Henry. Jane contested the will and the leases after a fashion, but it was her daughter Georgiana who succeeded in reclaiming her title to this property from Henry's heir – Ann Dundas's son (89). Jane willed almost all her real and personal property to Georgiana, who, as the residual legatee of her father, was quite well off (78).

Georgiana was stubborn, like her mother, but also earnest, attentive to business, and combative. She vigorously asserted what she believed were her rights against the claims of male members of the family (her half-brother Westmorland and her cousin Dundas), whom she did not hesitate to sue (81, 89). She did not appreciate being expected to defer to these relatives and to others, simply because they were males and she was not. She generally felt that social and legal conventions stifled and devalued women (81, 84). She never married, which gave her the freedom to manage her affairs as she saw fit. She also visited the Island and opened her purse to pay for infrastructure and to fund charitable activities. But she refused to give any consideration to selling, kept a close eye on the way the estate was managed and on the political situation on

the Island (she corresponded with resident landlords for this purpose), and lobbied the Colonial Office so intensively that she soon wore out her welcome. As far as the gentlemen in that office were concerned, Lady Georgiana was a tiresome member of the “no surrender” party with really too much time on her hands and, even when they agreed with her position, they wished she would go away (91-104 *passim*).

Charlotte Sullivan inherited her enormous Island estate in 1866, at the height of the Tenant League agitation. At home, she was known as a generous philanthropist, particularly interested in the plight of the London poor. Because of this, and because her father had supported the Fifteen Year Purchase Bill, Islanders believed that she was likely to sell when she came to visit her estate, if for no better reason that it would benefit her tenants. Sullivan, however, came to the conclusion that her tenants did not need charity, especially compared to London slum dwellers. In particular, she objected to the price that she was offered for the property as the capital, once invested, would yield less than the rents she was collecting (126-7). Bittermann and McCallum wonder whether the lady landlords may have resisted selling because they could secure similar income levels only by shifting to riskier investments. They surmise that female investors, less closely involved in business than men, were less familiar with existing opportunities, less able to gauge risks, and less capable of recouping losses through other activities such as business or salaried employment. Thus, lady landlords would have clung to their safe investment till the bitter end. Charlotte certainly avoided risks. At her death in 1911, her assets were in real property and consols (government bonds) (128-30). Although seemingly commonsensical, this explanation reflects an inaccurate image of British female investors, who could be aggressive portfolio managers and even downright speculators. Investors’ guides aimed directly at females were readily available to help those who were so inclined.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, a large proportion of Island estates may well have been bequeathed to women by men who believed that women had no head for investments and should be provided with safe, albeit modest, income streams. Women knew that the separate spheres ideology was followed in the breach, but the men were slow to catch up. Hence, a quarter of the Island that had been granted exclusively to men in 1767 was in female hands a century later (8).

The book fleshes out the understanding of the struggle to end landlordism on the Island that one can derive from the work that has been done on the topic by Bittermann and Robertson. It is, however, more interesting for what it tells us about the plight of elite women whose property fell under the control of their husband

2 See, for example, Alastair Owens, “Making some provisions for the contingencies to which their sex is particularly liable: Women and investment in early nineteenth century England,” in *Women, Business and Finance in nineteenth century Europe*, ed. Robert Beachy, Béatrice Craig, and Alastair Owens (London: Berg, 2006), 32; David R. Green and Alastair Owens, “Gentlewomanly capitalism? Spinsters, widows and wealth holding in England and Wales c. 1800-1860,” *Economic History Review* LVI (August 2003): 510-36; Mark Freeman, Robin Pearson, and James Taylor, “‘A Doe in the City’: Women Shareholders in eighteenth and early nineteenth century Britain,” *Accounting, Business and Financial History* 16, no. 2 (July 2006): 265-91; Josephine Maltby and Janette Rutterford, “‘She possessed her own fortune’: Women investors from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century,” *Business History* 45, no. 2 (April 2006): 220-53; and Janette Rutterford and Josephine Maltby, “The Widow, the Clergyman and the Reckless: Women Investors in England, 1830-1914,” *Feminist Economics* 12, no. 1-2 (2006): 111-38.

when they married, to the point where he could behave as if he owned it. Even single women, who were free to manage their assets, discovered quickly that men believed women should follow their advice, and deemed them to be difficult when they did not. In particular, ladies should refrain from interfering in political processes, even those that might affect their property. Women were supposed to play nice and go home when the men wanted the field to themselves, and being the tenth earl of Westmorland's daughter really did not change this situation. Even the label used to categorize them – “lady landlords” and not “landladies” – reflects the fact that they were perceived as anomalies in a man's world.

William Cooper, the principal subject of Bittermann's *Sailor's Hope: The Life and Times of William Cooper, Agrarian Radical in an Age of Revolutions* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), was one of the landlords' most stubborn opponents. In the 1830s, he led the failed escheat movement. He did not admit defeat, however, and kept pressing for the end of the landlord system. By doing so, he kept the issue at the forefront of Island politics and forced the landlords' supporters onto the defensive. By the 1860s, even conservatives had reached the conclusion that landlordism had to be ended. The question was how? By the time of Cooper's death in 1867, landlordism was not dead but its end was in sight (68-241 passim).

The book is not interesting only for its account of Cooper's political activities, which have already been well covered in *Rural Protest*. Cooper's life – and his children's (whose activities on the Island and in California take about a third of the book) – also provide an excellent vantage point from which one can observe the workings of many phenomena that affected ordinary Britons and British North Americans during the 19th century, as well as the interplay of personal circumstances and larger events: pioneering, with its associated geographic and social mobility; changes in family and class relations; and the shift away from a society based on paternalism, deference, and entitlement to one dominated by an ethos of hard work and patient accumulation, and finally to one where restless ambition could be viewed as legitimate. Cooper was a poor, orphaned Scottish boy when he ran away to sea at age 11 – at a time when there was a shortage of merchant mariners on account of the Napoleonic Wars (8-20). This, and his determined auto-didacticism, allowed him to climb the career ladder rapidly and become a captain while still in his twenties (21-5). Without those wars, which cut Britain off from its Baltic supply of wood, he perhaps would never have visited Prince Edward Island, where he picked up loads of timber (25-31). Like thousands of seamen, soldiers, farmers, and labourers, he escaped the post-war depression by relocating his family to North America, in his case on an island he was beginning to get to know (43). He leased land for a farm (45-6), but did not limit himself to farming and probably never intended to farm in the first place. Cooper does not fit the mould of the stereotypical pioneer who lived in quasi-autarky while carving out a farm in the wilderness. For him, farming was a baseline activity to which he added others that seemed profitable (working as an agent for an absentee landlord, milling, and later shipbuilding). He called his farm “Sailor's Hope,” possibly reflecting his refusal to define himself in terms of a single occupation (47-116 passim).

The story repeated itself with his sons. Landlordism restricted their options and they wanted to try their luck elsewhere: Australia, New Zealand, Latin America, and

the United States (107-18). Ultimately, the family relocated to California (Cooper came back and died on the Island), where the sons engaged in the same mix of farming and business activities as their father had on the Island; there they faced different challenges, including epidemic disease and Native American hostility (134-253 *passim*).

Cooper's political leadership formed an important dimension – and a logical outcome – of his multiple activities. He had settled in a part of the Island (Bay Fortune) where power was not concentrated in the hands of a single man or family. Bay Fortune settlers had managed to achieve a modest competence through a mixture of economic activities and through involvement in regional trade (with Nova Scotia and Newfoundland). These were the people who had the most to gain from the end of landlordism, more than their poorer neighbours or the squatters. Indeed, they were the most likely to see the landlords as obstacles to their aspirations (79).

Cooper's work ethic and political ideas were also a product of his time, his class, and his life experience. He believed that a man should be able to better himself through hard work, persistent efforts, and patient accumulation. This caused friction with his sons, who believed in hard work but not in patience; they were more interested in trying for windfall profits from trade, even if it meant engaging in risky, speculative ventures (120-1). Cooper's work ethic could not be reconciled with landlordism either. Cooper, like many of his contemporaries, believed in the labour theory of value: what made the value of a commodity was the labour necessary to produce it (247). Land on the Island was valuable because the tenants had improved it, and landlords who evicted tenants or racked the rents were stealing the fruits of the tenants' labour. By the 1860s, this had segued into a freeholder ideology – land should belong to those cultivating it. Cooper and the Island reformers resembled American agrarian reformers, such as the Maine Backwoods settlers, who, two generations before, had fought the state's great proprietors using exactly the same arguments.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, the freeholding ideology was not unique to the Island.

*Sailor's Hope* is a lively, richly textured, and deeply contextualized narrative that makes it possible to view and understand the world through Cooper's and his sons' eyes. There was a world that was not confined by political boundaries or even oceans, nor – for them – should it have been restricted by class. The Coopers believed that a man should be able to shape his own destiny wherever he wanted, and that class entitlements were illegitimate obstacles to those aspirations.

This society of small freeholders was the world Andrew Macphail, the subject of Ian Ross Robertson's biography – *Sir Andrew Macphail: The Life and Legacy of a Canadian Man of Letters* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008) – came to idealize, and which Macphail tried to recapture in his posthumously published novel, *The Master's Wife*.<sup>4</sup> The tenants who fought for the end of landlordism may even have included Macphail's grandparents, Scottish immigrants who first moved to Nova Scotia in 1833 and then to Prince Edward Island in 1841 (where Macphail's grandfather worked as a school teacher). Andrew

3 Alan Taylor, *Liberty Men and Great Proprietors: The Revolutionary Settlements on the Maine Frontier, 1760-1820* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1990).

4 Sir Andrew Macphail, *The Master's Wife*, introduction by Ian Ross Robertson (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977).

was born in 1864, on a tenanted farm his father, also a school teacher, had acquired that very year (and his landlords were ladies, daughters of the early lieutenant governor Edmund Fanning). Young Andrew attended the prestigious Prince of Wales College in Charlottetown on a scholarship, and then went into teaching. However, he soon left the Island to study medicine at McGill University. As his savings were melting away rapidly, he began working as a journalist, and did so well that at one point he briefly considered giving up medicine altogether. After graduation, he opened a practice in Montreal and married the daughter of a leading Montreal businessman (she died prematurely in 1902). He first taught medicine at Bishop's College Faculty of Medicine in Montreal, and subsequently was appointed professor in the history of medicine at McGill. He became the founding editor of the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* in 1911 (3-49 passim).

In the meantime Macphail had allowed his medical practice to dwindle, preferring instead to devote himself to a life of letters and culture (64). He had joined a literary and artistic club, the Pen and Pencil Club, as early as 1897 (50-6), and in 1907 took over editing McGill's alumni newsletter, which he promptly transformed into a quarterly of culture and opinion under the title *University Magazine*. The magazine was very successful, reaching a circulation of almost 6,000 in 1912 thanks to Macphail's editorial skills as well as his financial support (chap. 4 passim, 281). Macphail also tried his hand at writing poetry, fiction, and drama, before finding his niche as an essayist (56-60). He published his work in the *University Magazine* and in other periodicals, including the *British Spectator*, and rapidly gained a reputation as one of the premier essayists in Canada (85-168 passim). Although past his 50th birthday, Macphail joined the Canadian Medical Corps early in the First World War and served for the duration of the conflict (176-89). On his return to Canada, he resumed the position of editor of the *University Magazine*, the subscription list of which had shrunk dramatically during the war years. He was not able to reverse the decline, and the magazine ceased publication in 1920 (190-7). Macphail also resumed his literary career. He wrote a critical, and controversial, history of the Medical Corps, and published a volume of biographies and more essays (209-34). When he died in 1938, he left the manuscript of a fictionalized biography of his parents. It was published privately the following year by his children under the title *The Master's Wife*. The novel, which extolled the virtues of Prince Edward Island's traditional rural society, was poorly distributed and went largely unnoticed at the time (245-56). Yet it has since been reprinted twice – in 1977 and 1994 – each time with an introduction by Robertson (253, 256).

Macphail earned a place in English Canadian cultural history due to his essays, his editorship of the *University Magazine*, and later *The Master's Wife*. However, like many authors who were famous in their day, Macphail the essayist has faded into oblivion – likely because his message does not resonate with modern sensibilities. Indeed, his views were already dated when he published his essays. Robertson describes him as an “imperialist” who “envisioned a decentralized empire, with Canada playing an increasing role and exercising more power” (xvi), but also as an enemy of change and a social conservative who viewed the United States as a model of all that should not be emulated. His conservatism appears to have been extremely conventional. His anti-feminist arguments, for instance, were unoriginal. So were his ideas about education. He was also a free-trader, despite his

conservatism, but his position was nonetheless coherent: protection shielded manufacturers, whom he despised, artificially sustained urbanization, which he condemned, and harmed farmers, who were the repositories of all virtues, by making them pay more for their goods. Some of his contemporaries denounced the new world taking shape around them because they were repelled by the factory system, working-class slums, and the shoddiness of mass-produced goods. Macphail appears to simply have disliked change.

To the abomination of the contemporary urban-industrial world, Macphail contrasted agrarian societies that seemed to have escaped the plague. One was inter-war Quebec, home of unreconstructed Catholicism, unabashed agriculturalists, and women who bred. He even translated *Maria Chapdelaine* into English (234-7). The other was Prince Edward Island, where he spent his summers and kept a farm, and which he described in *The Master's Wife* as inhabited by self-sufficient farmers and traditional craftsmen as disdainful of commerce and the cash nexus as French Canadians. This, however, looks like a rearguard action; the world he idealized had not been lost, but had never existed. Rural islanders had included William Cooper and his sons, and although they subscribed to the freeholder ideology they certainly did not despise commerce. Cooper's sons had not wanted to become farmers and had shown no interest in learning a trade, and Cooper himself never limited his activities to farming. Macphail seems to have foreshadowed the "household economists" – those American social historians who, during the 1970s, 1980s, and even 1990s, depicted 18th- and 19th-century farmers in the northern United States ("yeomen") as bitterly resisting "markets" and "capitalist" encroachment on community-based exchange networks.<sup>5</sup> These historians and Macphail shared the same dislike of the commercial-capitalist order, which they imagined could not have been willingly embraced. Robertson describes Macphail's agrarianism as a product of his ancestry. Perhaps this is so, but the freeholder ideology – the notion that the ideal society was one of independent farmers and craftspeople – had long been part of the foundation of American society (e.g., Jefferson's republicanism). And Macphail himself, as Robertson notes (250), had never intended to become a farmer: the work was too hard!

In the grand scheme of things, the *University Magazine* was probably Macphail's greatest contribution to Canadian cultural life. It launched several literary careers (including at least one female author), and although Macphail used it to express his views he opened its pages to contrary opinions thus stimulating debates about important issues of the day (such as the nature of the British Empire and the future of Canada). A periodical with a 6,000-strong subscription list had to be one that had an impact. Macphail thus contributed to the existence, and perhaps emergence, of a Habermasian public sphere in English Canada.

Robertson is clearly a great admirer of Macphail, whom he accidentally discovered while a student at McGill (253). Unfortunately, Macphail comes across in this biography as a curmudgeon, and the oil portrait used for the cover is that of a grumpy old man. Robertson also cannot resist the urge to put on paper every factoid he has

5 For two major expositions of this thesis, see James Henretta, "Families and Farms: *Mentalité* in Pre-Industrial America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 35, no. 1 (January 1978): 3-33, and Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

uncovered about his subject. The overall argument thus gets bogged down, when it is not completely submerged, by a flood of minutiae. Readers may want, after the introduction, to skip straight to the concluding chapter – which rises above the details and highlights the salient points of Macphail’s life and clarifies their importance – and then browse the chapters for additional details about what specifically interests them (although the first chapter is also a good description of life as a farmer and teacher on the Island at the end of the 19th century). Looking at his subject through a microscope also obscures the context. Robertson tells us, for instance, that Macphail was an imperialist and explains his vision of the empire and the place of Canada in it. But Robertson does not tell us who shared this vision and who opposed it, how Macphail’s essays on the topic were received by different segments of society, what impact – if any – his essays had on politicians and public opinion, when this vision emerged, whether Macphail spearheaded it (or merely echoed the ideas of others), how it evolved if it did, and how it was affected by the Great War. The same can be said about the other ideas Macphail developed in his writing and which are discussed in the book. They float – unmoored to any political, intellectual, or social context. The public sphere in which Macphail participated is largely invisible. Particularly unfortunate is the lack of any reference to the literature on antimodernism, even in the chapter entitled “Against the Moderns” (113-34). Ian McKay’s work, for instance, is not listed in the bibliography. Was Macphail a typical Maritime – or Canadian – turn-of-the-century antimodernist? Or a mere neophobe? The issue is not addressed.

Robertson also seems oblivious to the irony of Macphail’s life. Regarding “the local way of life [in Prince Edward Island], especially the farming component,” the book notes that Macphail “had taken the first opportunity to break loose from it” but shies away from exploring this paradox, blandly stating that Macphail’s “position in relation to community values appears ambiguous at some points” (250). This is the least one can say. Here was a man who rejected the modern world and specifically industrialization and urbanization in his writing, but could not have led the life of comfort, privilege even, that gave him the necessary leisure and income to write had he chosen to become a farmer – and who had married a Montreal businessman’s daughter. In the final analysis, Macphail was not important in himself, but for what he made possible. He was an important building block in the construction of English Canadian cultural life at the beginning of the 20th century. The problem with this biography is that the block has been isolated from the wall and it is never clear where exactly it fits.

Robertson’s biography is typical of older forms of the genre, characterized by exhaustive research, painstaking attention to details, assumption of the importance of the subject but weak demonstration of the said importance, and tunnel vision. He has difficulties looking past his subject to the broader context, and ends up preaching to the choir. Context, on the other hand, is ever present in the books by Bittermann and by Bittermann and McCallum. They use their subjects as windows into social groups, places, and processes. They help us understand how larger events were experienced by the individuals who lived through them and how individual agencies shape those events. Robertson studies Macphail for his own sake; Bittermann and McCallum write the lives of the Coopers and the lady landlords for the sake of better understanding the world of which they were part.