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Hume: A city that forgets its history is condemned to delete it

November 06, 2010

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Toronto Star columnist Christopher Hume points out a plaque marking the birthplace of Robert Baldwin, who along with Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine, created the Canada we know.

RANDY RISLING/TORONTO STAR

Canada has never been much interested in its history. Neither has Toronto.

That's a shame; the nation's story is genuinely remarkable, as is the city's. Not only are the two indivisible, they are unique.

And although John A. Macdonald has been elevated to the exalted rank of the great Canadian political hero, others argue that the true creators of Canada were leaders whose names have been all but forgotten.

Indeed, two of the most important — Robert Baldwin and Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine — are rarely remembered today. Their names hover dimly at the back of our minds, recalled, if at all, because of the odd plaque or street name. Some attribute this collective forgetfulness to our colonial past, but in a country hungry for an identity of its own, their lives and careers are the stuff of which national myths are made.

That's why John Ralston Saul, author and a self-proclaimed "public intellectual," has taken it upon himself to rescue Baldwin and LaFontaine from obscurity.

"What they did was quite amazing," says Saul. "No other colony managed to talk its way out of an empire. Together they took the first big step in the creation of modern Canada. They moved the country from being a colony to achieving Responsible Government."

Some may feel this eludes us still, but the fact is the two men — best friends as well as staunch political allies — led the overthrow of entrenched interests, the oligarchs who assumed the country was theirs to despoil as they pleased. The Family Compact in Upper Canada (Ontario) and the Château Clique in Lower Canada (Quebec) would stop at nothing to get their way.

"In any colony there's always a Family Compact," Saul explains. "They get the contracts and the benefits of contracts but without the responsibility."

As he writes in his book, *Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine & Robert Baldwin,* (published earlier this year by Penguin), "In Upper Canada, the struggle between the reformers and the Family Compact often seemed like an incipient civil war, with enemies sitting across from each other in the same churches and belonging to the same associations."

Aided and abetted by a series of blatantly partisan Tory governors general, the Compact suppressed democracy and fought viciously to maintain the privileges to which it believed it was entitled simply by virtue of birth. Because it also controlled the judiciary and virtually every other public institution, it could jail opponents, have them beaten up by Orange Order thugs, transported to Van Diemen's Land, or even hanged.

". . . the Château Clique, like the Family Compact in Toronto, could only hide their crude desire for power and money behind a vague, romantic theory of racial loyalty," Saul writes. "There was always some noble discourse about British constitutional principles or Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité, or the civilization of the Holy Roman Empire, or Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. But when it came to their colonies it was all about race and power."

But as Baldwin and LaFontaine quickly realized, to fight violence with violence was a sure road to defeat. They also came to understand that Canada would have to find its own way. It became clear that importing political and social models from Europe of the United States wouldn't work here.

Their response — non-violence, civil disobedience and an uncanny ability to turn the rules against their imperial enforcers — was not simply successful, it was enlightened. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King would later adapt the same basic strategy and change the world in the process.

After Baldwin and LaFontaine finally prevailed, taking power in 1848, they embarked on a wildly ambitious legislative program that would lead to the establishment of Canada as we know it.

“Baldwin and LaFontaine began to transform the country by moving a barrage of laws through Parliament,” Saul explains. “Perhaps most important was an election bill aimed at stopping the violence and manipulation. The number of voters doubled within three years. A public education bill focused people on the direct link between taxes and egalitarian society: if you want an educated population you have to pay taxes, an idea that infuriated the Tories . . . They established the independence of judges . . . Equally important, they began to change the face of the public service. Suddenly farmers and Habitants were being named to local positions.”

These are things Canadians now take for granted, so basic they’re almost invisible. So is the 19th-century city in which the two men re-imagined the country. Baldwin’s birthplace, on the northwest corner of Front and Frederick Sts., is a plaque on the outside wall of Starbucks. But the site of his house at Bay and Front, for a decade the de facto political capital of Canada, has been obliterated. The land where Parliament stood is now the CBC Broadcast Centre. The only memorial here celebrates not Baldwin but the late Glenn Gould.

“You’ve got to have a sense of where it started,” Saul insists. “It’s important to talk about these things openly so people can see what it looks like when you get it right and when you get it wrong. You’re validated by your own history. Then as now, the questions are the same: Is society nothing more than self-interest? Or is there a shared public good?”

The answer, as always, is up for discussion.

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