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Ceci n'est pas Ramsay Cook: A Biographical Reconnaissance

Donald Wright

I

... before they go about collecting evidence, historians must have a reason for looking, a question in mind, and that question will determine what evidence is found, and how it is interpreted.

— Peter Lamont

Wanting to interview someone about the use and abuse of history by governments, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation turned to Ramsay Cook, professor emeritus at York University.¹ The conversation centred on the problems that arise when a government advances *a version* of the past as *the* past. At one point, Cook cited René Magritte's famous 1929 painting, *The Treachery of Images* (*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*), to comment on just what a complicated business writing history is. In the same way that Magritte's painting of a pipe is not a pipe, he said, 'History as it is written is not the past; it is a representation of the past'.² Listening to Cook's defence of historical complexity, I realised that his biography would make the perfect third volume to my study of the historical profession in English

1 For a brief summary of Cook's career, see Michael Behiels and Marcel Martel, 'Introduction', in Behiels and Martel, eds, *Nation, Ideas, Identities: Essays in Honour of Ramsay Cook* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2000).

2 Ramsay Cook, CBC Radio, *The Sunday Edition*, 16 June 2013.

Canada. Genuinely surprised, Cook wondered if I would not be wiser and saner after completing a biography of Donald Creighton – a notoriously difficult man and, curiously enough, his doctoral supervisor – to turn my attention to something more distant and less controversial, ‘like early Inuit settlements in Greenland’.³ Still, he would think about it. Eight days later he agreed, on two conditions. First, I was to treat this project as I would any project, as an independent piece of research and writing. Second, I was to read *The Rise of the Indian Rope Trick: The Biography of a Legend* by Peter Lamont.

Of course, I was pleased, but what did a history of a magic trick have to do with anything? *The Rise of the Indian Rope Trick* is about many things – the rope trick itself, the West’s fascination with the ‘mysterious’ East and, as its subtitle suggests, the problem of biography.⁴ Obscured by imperfect memories, competing accounts, contested facts, archival silences, stretches, compressions, elisions and omissions, to say nothing of the biographer’s own reasons for undertaking the project in the first place, biography is not the person in the same way that history is not the past. Like Magritte’s pipe, it is a representation of the person. Hermione Lee called it ‘an artificial construct’ while Mark Twain likened the challenge of writing a biography to that of reconstructing a dinosaur from ‘nine bones and 600 barrels of plaster’.⁵ In telling me to read *The Rise of the Indian Rope Trick*, Cook was sending me a message: Wright, the best you will ever do is a representation of me so read widely, be thorough in your research, ask tough questions, check your own reasons at the door and take nothing for granted. In other words, do your homework. This essay, therefore, constitutes my first real homework assignment: a biographical reconnaissance of Ramsay Cook’s childhood, adolescence and early 20s.

A reconnaissance, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is ‘a survey, inspection, etc., carried out in order to gain information of some kind’.⁶ To this end, I intend to map the main features, key influences and recurring themes in Cook’s life as a child and adolescent growing up in Canada’s prairie west and later as a graduate student at Queen’s. If I am

3 Ramsay Cook, email to author, 19 June 2013.

4 Peter Lamont, *The Rise of the Indian Rope Trick: The Biography of a Legend* (London: Little, Brown, 2004).

5 Hermione Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 122, doi.org/10.1093/acrade/9780199533541.001.0001; Mark Twain, ‘Is Shakespeare Dead?’ in Charles Neider, ed., *The Complete Essays of Mark Twain* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), 422.

6 ‘reconnaissance, *n.*’, *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

right, the key to understanding the most important historian and public intellectual of his generation, a man who consistently articulated an open, decent and tolerant Canada, is to be found there.⁷ But my use of the word reconnaissance is also historiographical. According to Ian McKay, a strategy of reconnaissance obviates the need for synthesis and comprehensiveness at the same time as it accepts 'the contingency, difficulty, and political riskiness of any and all attempts to generalize beyond the particular – and the inescapable necessity of doing so'. Explicitly political, McKay's strategy of reconnaissance is also linked to what he calls 'a multi-generational and protracted struggle for equality and justice'.⁸ By locating paths both taken and not taken in the past, and by identifying men and women who reasoned and lived otherwise, who found ways to oppose prevailing capitalist certainties and bourgeois orthodoxies, or liberal rule, McKay aims to contribute to the historical struggle to imagine and achieve a more equitable and democratic present. McKay's own reconnaissance has focused on those rebels, reds and radicals who challenged Canada as a project of liberal rule. My reconnaissance has a different focus because Cook was neither a rebel nor a radical. He was a liberal who did not have much to say about property and its unequal distribution.

But he had a lot to say about minority rights and equality. And as Elsbeth Heaman reminds us, the struggle for minority rights and equality is historical and ongoing, not over and done with.⁹ A biographical reconnaissance of Ramsay Cook, therefore, is the necessary first step in understanding where his ethical voice came from. It was that voice that enabled him as a historian to put social, ethnic and linguistic complexity at the heart of his interpretive understanding of Canada's past and present. Cook's intellectual journey, like that of every historian, began early in life.

7 What do I mean by public intellectual? As Doug Munro writes, 'the term evades ready definition because the range of individuals to whom it is applied is so amorphous, the issues they confront so varied, the methods they employ so contrasting, and the circumstances and contexts within which they function can be so different'. Ramsay Cook was not a 'cultural critic' and he did not occupy the 'corridors of power', except briefly in 1968. But from a place of 'civic obligation' and 'moral imperative', he engaged, in print and in person, with what the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism called the 'greatest crisis' in Canadian history – the threat of Quebec independence. Doug Munro, *J.C. Beaglehole: Public Intellectual, Critical Conscience* (Wellington: Steele Roberts, 2012), 64.

8 Ian McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise: Leftists and the People's Enlightenment in Canada, 1890–1920* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2008), 3, 2.

9 See E.A. Heaman, 'Rights Talk and the Liberal Order Framework', in Jean-François Constant and Michel Ducharme, eds, *Liberalism and Hegemony: Debating the Canadian Liberal Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

II

This is the story of a boy and the wind.

— W.O. Mitchell

‘Canadians born on the prairies are especially fortunate in at least one respect’, Ramsay Cook once said, because ‘their childhood has been immortalized’ in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, a novel about one boy’s coming of age in a small prairie town in the 1930s.¹⁰ The town itself has a couple of churches, a school and a newspaper; the main street features shops and businesses with names like Nelson’s Bakery, Harris’s Hardware and Blaine’s Store; there is a hotel, a pool hall and a small restaurant, the Bluebird Café, owned by a man from China named Wong. Laying ‘wide around the town’ is the Saskatchewan prairie, ‘the least common denominator of nature’, and it, more than anything else, gives the novel its evocative power.¹¹ Cook’s fondness for W.O. Mitchell – he even named his sailboat *The W.O. Mitchell* – comes from his memories of growing up in small towns in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. But it is more than simple nostalgia, because the wind in *Who Has Seen The Wind* is God and God – or at least organised religion – played a central role in Cook’s childhood and adolescence: his father, George Russell Cook, was a United Church minister and his mother, Lillie Ellen Cook, was a United Church minister’s wife.

When Russell Cook was 14 years old his father died, leaving him with no inheritance and a difficult decision: he could work on the fishing docks of Grimsby – a busy port city on the east coast of England where the Humber estuary meets the North Sea – or he could emigrate. Having already spent a year or two collecting and selling cod livers, he chose to emigrate. To countless late Victorian and Edwardian British boys, the ‘very word “Canada” seemed to epitomize adventure’. In those days, Canada meant the North West, ‘an ill-defined and variously defined’ place of cowboys, Indians, horse thieves and whisky traders, of forts, outposts and shacks belonging to old trappers, of prairies, rivers, coulees (ravines) and footpaths walked by both ‘the war-whooping scalp hunter’ and the noble

10 Ramsay Cook, ‘William Kurelek: A Prairie Boy’s Visions’, in Cook, *Canada, Quebec, and the Uses of Nationalism* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986), 147.

11 W.O. Mitchell, *Who Has Seen the Wind* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1947), 3. On using literature to write history see Ramsay Cook, ‘The Uses of Literature in Cultural History’, *The English Quarterly* 4:3 (Fall 1971), 25–30.

red child of the great plains.¹² Seeking adventure and perhaps hoping to escape 'the rigidities of the English class structure', Cook boarded the *Lake Manitoba* in Liverpool in April 1913 with \$25 in his pocket. He was one of about 150,000 Britons emigrating to Canada that year 'in search of a better standard of living'.¹³

Too young to homestead, Cook worked as a farm labourer in Saskatchewan, not far from Carlyle, a town settled primarily by British settlers and named after Thomas Carlyle, the great nineteenth-century historian. When the war broke out a year later, he did not enlist. He would have been just 16 years old. But as the war dragged on, the pressure to enlist increased. The local newspaper even suggested that candidates in the 1917 general election who opposed conscription 'should be put in the front line trenches without a gun'.¹⁴ Still, Cook continued to work as a labourer until he was conscripted under the terms of the Military Service Act and taken on strength by the 1st Depot Battalion, Saskatchewan Regiment, on 28 May 1918. He never made it overseas: only 24,000 men of the nearly 400,000 men who registered for conscription ever reached the front. Although his service record provides few clues, he may have been exempted under the rules of what the Act called 'Domestic Position': if a family member had enlisted, and 'especially' if that family member had been 'wounded or killed', one could apply for an exemption.¹⁵ Cook's brother had enlisted as a private in the British Expeditionary Force, in the 10th Service Battalion Lincolnshire Regiment, or the Grimsby Chums, and been killed at Vimy Ridge on 11 April 1917. His silver cigarette case had stopped the first bullet, but not the second.

After being struck off strength on 13 January 1919, Cook returned to Carlyle and to the woman he had married just six months earlier, Lillian Ellen Young, the daughter of a local farming family. With help from his mother in England, Russell and Lillie Cook purchased three quarters, or 480 acres, near Alameda, a town just south of Carlyle that had been settled in the 1880s by a handful of families from England and Scotland and by German Americans from Michigan. They also started a family: a son, Vincent; a daughter, Luella; and, in 1931, another son, George Ramsay. Born in the farm house of a local midwife – and, according to family

12 R.G. Moyles and Doug Owram, *Imperial Dreams and Colonial Realities: British Views of Canada, 1880–1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 40, 49.

13 Robert Craig Brown and Ramsay Cook, *Canada, 1896–1921: A Nation Transformed* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), 57.

14 'Additional Locals', *Alameda Dispatch*, 7 December 1917.

15 Parliament of Canada, *Military Service Act 1917*, Section 11.

history, during an early winter blizzard – he was named George after his father and both of his grandfathers.¹⁶ At least initially, Russell Cook made a go of it as a mixed farmer – principally grain and Holstein cattle – but as the Great Depression entered its second year, as prices dropped and markets disappeared, he fell further and further behind. Although only a child at the time, Ramsay Cook can still picture the family farm ‘more or less blowing away’ in 1936.¹⁷ Twenty-three years earlier, Russell Cook had faced a similar fork in the road when his father died: he could stick it out on a recalcitrant farm or he could take a chance.

Entering St Andrew’s College, the theological college of the United Church of Canada on the campus of the University of Saskatchewan, he took a chance. He was 39 years old, hardly the typical 18- or 19-year-old first-year theology student, but a few years earlier he had become a lay supply minister in the United Church, conducting services in churches that were either too small or too poor to have a regular minister. He liked the work, and when a United Church minister and administrator told him that he would make a good minister, he thought, well, why not? Studying theology was not easy, but St Andrew’s was a lot of fun: he curled on a college rink, served as vice-president of the St Andrew’s Undergraduate Association, and on at least one occasion found himself decorating the dining hall in purple and gold, the college colours.¹⁸

In addition to his studies, Cook had a mission field in Raymore and Punnichy, which required him to lead two services every Sunday in addition to fulfilling his pastoral care duties, visiting shut-ins, holding the hands of the dying and comforting the bereaved. Ramsay Cook remembers his father returning from Saskatoon on Friday night or sometimes Saturday morning and leaving again on Monday morning, sometimes as early as four o’clock, to catch the train back to Saskatoon. It was exhausting, especially in the winter months when he had to walk from Raymore to Punnichy if the roads were not ploughed.¹⁹

16 Ramsay Cook’s birth announcement states that he was born in the ‘Nursing Home of Mrs R.W. Wood on Saturday, 28 November 1931’. Nursing homes were not licensed and midwives did not have formal training. Still, they got the job done. See ‘Births’, *Alameda Dispatch*, 11 December 1931.

17 Author’s interview with Ramsay Cook, 14 July 2014.

18 ‘Theologs Hold Banquet’, *The Sheaf*, 21 February 1939, University of Saskatchewan Archives (USA).

19 Author’s interview with Ramsay Cook, 14 July 2014.

Initially, the Raymore congregation complained about having to pay 'a married student preacher' because it meant more mouths to feed. But Cook quickly earned their trust and admiration for his efforts to turn Raymore United into a vital social institution by improving the Sunday school, keeping the church clean, ensuring that the bells were rung according to a schedule, and assisting in a vegetable drive for the 'dried-out areas of the province'.²⁰

A 'deeply religious' woman with a 'caring, gentle soul', Lillie Cook also won over the congregation, readily assuming her responsibilities as a minister's wife.²¹ Her experience was not the experience of the minister's wife on the Depression-era prairies depicted by Sinclair Ross in his novel *As for Me and my House*. Mrs Bentley is unhappy, unfulfilled and, above all else, tired – tired of being 'close to the financial breaking point', tired of being 'frumpy' because she cannot afford a new dress, and tired of being the object of the congregation's gaze, especially the gaze of the Ladies' Aid in the form of its president and 'first lady of the congregation'.²² For her part, Lillie served as secretary of the Ladies' Aid and treasurer of the Women's Missionary Society. It was the women who kept these small churches going, organising church suppers, raising money for repairs to the manse, teaching Sunday school, and hosting endless teas.²³ In 1937, the church leadership thanked the Ladies' Aid 'for their exceptionally good showing in raising over \$400 for church purposes in a hard year'; a few years later, it acknowledged that were it not for the Ladies' Aid 'it would be very difficult for us to carry on'.²⁴

In 1940, Russell Cook graduated from St Andrew's and, a few months later, announced his intention to seek a new pastorate. Having come to appreciate what it called his 'conscientious and uncomplaining service', the church leadership urged him to stay and was even prepared to 'guarantee' a salary of \$1,200, although it is unlikely that it could have.²⁵ After all, it had paid him occasionally in farm products – including bunches of

20 Minutes of the Raymore Union Congregation, 16 May 1936 and 8 September 1936, Saskatchewan Archives Board (SAB), Minutes of the Raymore Union Congregation, A381.XV.A.5777.

21 Author's interview with Ramsay Cook, 14 July 2014.

22 Sinclair Ross, *As for Me and my House* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1957; first published in 1941), 9, 10, 6. Readers never learn Mrs Bentley's first name.

23 See Marilyn Färdig Whitely, "'Doing all the Rest": Church Women of the Ladies' Aid Society', in Sharon Anne Cook, Lorna McLean and Kathryn O'Rourke, eds, *Framing Our Past: Constructing Canadian Women's History in the Twentieth Century* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006).

24 Minutes of the Raymore Union Congregation, 24 January 1937 and 25 February 1940, SAB, Minutes of the Raymore Union Congregation, A381.XV.A.5777.

25 *Ibid.*, 24 January 1938.

rhubarb that he called Saskatchewan strawberries – and, as a result, he had accumulated too many debts to too many local merchants. ‘We were very poor’, Ramsay Cook now says. ‘But I didn’t know we were poor. The whole town was poor.’²⁶ Not far from Raymore was Wynyard, a larger centre with a larger congregation. Located south of an enormous drainage basin – named the Quill Lakes because of their location on the migratory routes of waterfowl and shorebirds – and first settled by Icelanders in 1904, Wynyard had grown quickly, attracting immigrants from Norway, Sweden, Great Britain, Poland, Germany and Ukraine. In 1941, it had a population of 1,080, making it the largest town in the district. But it too had trouble paying its minister, and Cook’s debts kept growing. It was time to make another change.

Canada and Great Britain – his two great loves – were at war with Germany, and this time Cook was determined to serve. Canada was a British country and he was a British subject, making his loyalties complementary, not contradictory. When the 1939 Royal Tour of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth made its way through Saskatchewan, he took his family to catch a glimpse of the first reigning monarch to visit North America. Ramsay Cook recalls being shuttled to five or six different whistle-stops and walkabouts on the royal route, including Melville, a small town north-east of Saskatoon, its grain elevator proudly decorated to form, according to the *Regina Leader-Post*, a ‘mighty welcome’.²⁷ Somewhere in the crowd of 60,000 people was a little boy on his dad’s shoulders. George VI was not only the King of Great Britain, he was the King of Canada,²⁸ and each Christmas Russell and Lillie Cook gathered Vincent, Luella and Ramsay around the radio to listen to *their* king’s annual broadcast.

To serve his two countries, Cook tried to join the air force but was told that he was too old. He said that he could train young pilots on the Link Trainer, even though he had never used a Link Trainer, much less flown a plane. The air force wisely declined his kind offer. He then tried to join the army as a chaplain, although it involved negotiating with a reluctant United Church and the threat that if he was not permitted to join the Canadian army then he would move to the United States and join the American army. In the

26 Author’s interview with Ramsay Cook, 14 July 2014.

27 ‘Bold Welcome to King and Queen at Melville’, *Regina Leader-Post*, 5 June 1939. See also Mary Vipond, ‘The Royal Tour of 1939 as a Media Event’, *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 35:1 (2010), 149–72.

28 Although sometimes called the King of Canada, George VI was not technically the King of Canada. Elizabeth II became the first monarch to be proclaimed Queen of Canada pursuant to the *Royal Style and Titles Act* 1953.

end, the United Church relented. Stationed at Camp Shilo in Manitoba, Cook moved his family to Brandon. Now that he was earning a modest but reliable salary, he paid his debts and bought a small house.

Brandon was not Alameda, Raymore or Wynyard; it was a city and, for the first time in his life, Ramsay Cook did not have to cut across the yard to an outhouse. He remembers listening to the speeches of Winston Churchill, singing patriotic songs at school and watching *Canada Carries On*, a series of short propaganda films on the war effort.²⁹ More importantly, he understood that 'there was a larger world outside and that something quite terrible was taking place'.³⁰ Because both his father and his brother – who had left college to join the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps in 1940 – were doing their bit, Ramsay would do his. In Wynyard, he had collected old bones from the surrounding fields to be used in the production of industrial glues.³¹ Now he followed the news coming out of Ottawa and London on a couple of old maps and an atlas; he cheered the exploits of Buzz Beurling, the 'Falcon of Malta', Canada's most successful fighter pilot; he wore a sweatshirt bearing the Union Jack and the title of Vera Lynn's popular song, 'There'll Always Be An England', and once punched a kid who begged to differ; he knitted woollen squares that were sewn together to make blankets for the Red Cross; he counted his nickels and dimes to buy War Savings Certificates; and he collected scrap metal, tin cans and glass bottles.

But Cook also experienced that moment in every child's life when he learned that the 'larger world outside' was not what it said it was. Reading anti-Japanese propaganda in the form of comic books took him back to the summer of 1940 when he and his parents visited his brother, then stationed in Victoria, British Columbia, and spent a month in a rented cottage.³² One day a boy about Ramsay's age showed up and, although he was Japanese Canadian, Russell and Lillie Cook were delighted that their son had a summer playmate. For the next couple of weeks, the boys were inseparable, for the most part spending their days fishing off a small dock.

29 On the National Film Board and *Canada Carries On*, see Pierre Véronneau, 'La Propagande du Genre de l'État Canadien: Le Cas de l'Office National du Film de 1940 à 1945', *Bulletin d'Histoire Politique*, 16:2 (2008), 151–62.

30 'American Society During World War II: An Interview with Prof. George Ramsay Cook', Center for American Studies, University of Tokyo, *Oral History Series*, 7 (1982), 1.

31 On the collection of bones and fat for military uses, see Ian Mosby, *Food Will Win the War: The Politics, Culture, and Science of Food on Canada's Home Front* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014).

32 On anti-Japanese propaganda in American comic books see Paul Hirsch, 'This Is Our Enemy: The Writer's War Board and Representations of Race in Comic Books, 1942–1945', *Pacific Historical Review*, 83:3 (2014), 448–86, doi.org/10.1525/phr.2014.83.3.448.



A young Ramsay Cook, left, fishing with his Japanese Canadian friend near Victoria, British Columbia, 1940

Source: York University Libraries, Clara Thomas Archives & Special Collections, Ramsay Cook fonds, ASC25757. With permission of Eleanor Cook.

The comic books depicting Emperor Hirohito as 'a fire breathing dragon' and Japanese soldiers as subhuman and 'essentially more cruel' than German soldiers did not make any sense. His friend, who had taught him how to bait a hook, cast a line and wait for the tug, was not cruel and he certainly did not breathe fire. He was 'human', Cook said, and he 'made me think differently'. Although 'I still probably thought that Emperor Hirohito breathed fire, I knew that there was at least one Japanese who didn't'.³³

III

Because that settlement and that land were my first and for many years my only real knowledge of the planet, in some profound way they remain my world, my way of viewing. My eyes were formed there.

— Margaret Laurence

Demobilised in 1946, Russell Cook received a pastorate in Morden, about 200 kilometres south-east of Brandon in the Pembina Valley. Like Raymore and Wynyard, Morden was a small town servicing a large farming district, principally wheat but also corn and apples. A run of stores and businesses with names like Turner's Bakery, Dack's Pharmacy, Goode's Confectionary and Atkins' Hardware lined Stephen Street. There was a restaurant or two, a hotel, a bowling alley, a pool hall and a grocery store run by a man named Mark Ki who had emigrated from China in 1902. There were several churches, at least 12 according to one count, each denomination having enough adherents in what was an ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse region, a microcosm really of the prairies that emerged at the turn of the century when Clifford Sifton, as Canada's minister of the interior, opened the west to immigrants from Scandinavia and eastern and central Europe. The large Mennonite farming population alone supported three separate churches. Meanwhile, the *Morden Times* covered Morden as well as Winkler, Darlingford, Rosebank and Plum Coulee.

33 'American Society During World War II: An Interview with Prof. George Ramsay Cook', 6. See also Ramsay Cook, 'JACS and my Discovery of Japan', *Japanese Association of Canadian Studies Newsletter*, 100:4 (2015), 3–4.

Because Cook understood that for any church to achieve what a St Andrew's classmate had called 'vitality',³⁴ he turned St Paul's United Church into a centre for both worship and fellowship by making its presence felt every day of the week, not just one day. In its 1940 Statement of Faith, the United Church of Canada had declared that 'God has appointed a Ministry in His Church for the preaching of the Word, the administration of the Sacraments, and the pastoral care of the people'.³⁵ As a minister, Cook preached God's word and administered His two sacraments, but 'he most enjoyed spending time with everyday people in common places like the coffee shop, the curling rink, [and] kids' hockey games'.³⁶ Within days of arriving in Morden in December 1946, he organised a special children's service and a Christmas cantata; in January, he planned a service to celebrate Canada's new Citizenship Act; and in February, March and April, he held events and led services to mark Valentine's Day, Shrove Tuesday, St Patrick's Day, Easter and the Battle of Vimy Ridge. On any given Sunday, he could lead services at three and sometimes four different churches that did not have their own ministers. He was also the chaplain to the Morden Branch of the Canadian Legion, eventually serving as its president. 'They are my boys,' he always said.³⁷

Meanwhile, Lillie Cook threw herself into her obligations as a minister's wife, joining the Women's Association and the Women's Missionary Society, opening the manse to the congregation and the community, assisting in the Food for Britain drive, and helping with the Valentine's Tea, the St Patrick's Day dinner and the annual Lilac Tea held each June. The Women's Association did not get much rest because the church hall had to be either 'gaily decorated' with red hearts, 'handsomely decorated' with green shamrocks or filled with bouquets of violet lilacs.³⁸ Within seven months of their arrival, Russell and Lillie had increased the membership of the congregation by welcoming the old, the young and the in-between. To keep teenagers interested in the life of the church – a problem now four decades old in Protestant churches across the country – they created youth groups, although that initiative did not take root, especially among

34 'Theologs Hold Banquet', *The Sheaf*, 21 February 1939, USA.

35 United Church of Canada, 'Statement of Faith', (1940), www.united-church.ca/beliefs/statements/1940 (accessed 25 May 2015).

36 'Spiritual Leadership: Rev. George Cook', mordenmb.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/11-Spiritual-WebLg.pdf (accessed 25 May 2015).

37 Author's interview with Ramsay Cook, 14 July 2014.

38 'Around the Town', *Morden Times*, 19 February 1947; 'Around the Town', *Morden Times*, 19 March 1947.

teenage boys. However, Lillie Cook revitalised the Canadian Girls in Training, even leading the senior group.³⁹ In fact, she included the girls – dressed in what W.O. Mitchell described as their smart uniforms of ‘white middies, blue skirts, and blue ties’ – in meetings of the Women’s Missionary Society.⁴⁰

Religiously driven and civic-minded, Russell and Lillie Cook lived their values on a daily basis, emanating hard work, delayed gratification, service to others and education, an example not lost on their children. Vincent had gone to St Andrew’s College, but joined the army and, after the war, made it his career. After high school, Luella studied nursing in Brandon, winning the Bronze Medal and the General Proficiency Prize in 1947. Two years later, she received a scholarship to do postgraduate work in nursing at the University of Western Ontario.⁴¹ Ramsay was still in high school, of course, but it was expected that he would go to university. Reflecting on his childhood and adolescence, Cook remembers something else about his parents: their tolerance and their commitment to equality. His mother’s family was a bit Orange – his grandmother once refused to take a particular medicine because it had alcohol in it, making it, she said, ‘Catholic’ – but his mother was not, not in the slightest. His father, meanwhile, was ‘a man with no prejudices’: yes, he sometimes grumbled about Germans during the war, and he was not pleased when the barber in Raymore, a German man named Mr Schindelka, cut Ramsay’s hair ‘the way Hitler wore his hair’, but on balance he lived his faith, believing that everyone was equal in the eyes of God. One of the few times Ramsay Cook ever saw his father angry was also in Raymore when the Native people would haul wood into town. Their price was already low, they were asking ‘almost nothing’, but still people ‘pushed the price down’, and ‘I remember how *angry* he was that people would cheat the Indians, as we called them in those days’. ‘I admired my father greatly’; ‘he was a wonderful man.’⁴²

39 On the CGIT, see Margaret Prang, “‘The Girl God Would Have Me Be’: The Canadian Girls in Training”, *Canadian Historical Review*, 66:2 (1985), 154–84, doi.org/10.3138/CHR-066-02-02; and Patricia Dirks, ‘Shaping Canada’s Women: Canadian Girls in Training versus Girl Guides’, in Cook, McLean and O’Rourke, *Framing Our Past*.

40 ‘Around the Town’, *Morden Times*, 30 March 1949; Mitchell, *Who*, 47.

41 ‘Around the Town’, *Morden Times*, 28 May 1947; ‘Around the Town’, *Morden Times*, 31 August 1949.

42 Author’s interview with Ramsay Cook, 14 July 2014.

Russell and Lillie Cook's tolerance and commitment to equality came naturally to them – it was who they were – and it came from the second great commandment – 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thy self' (Matthew 22:39). But it was also born on the prairies: 'if there is a word' that captures prairie political culture 'it is equality'.⁴³ Of course, racism, nativism and anti-immigrant sentiment found plenty of expression on the prairies in the first decades of the twentieth century. In his 1909 book, *Strangers Within Our Gates*, J.S. Woodsworth worried about the 'mixed multitude' of people from eastern and central Europe 'being dumped into Canada by a kind of endless chain': 'how shall we weld this heterogeneous mass into one people?'⁴⁴ The Protestant Church was one answer. A public school system was another. And attracting as many as 20,000 members worried about strangers, foreigners and Catholics, the Ku Klux Klan was yet another in 1920s Saskatchewan.⁴⁵ But, in the main, political, religious and civic leaders looked to the churches, the schools and, after the Second World War, the Canadian Citizenship Act.

'For years,' the *Morden Times* observed, 'Canadian-born citizens have suffered the humiliation of being classified according to their hereditary nationality', as Ukrainian Canadian, German Canadian and Chinese Canadian. But soon 'Canadian citizens will be able to travel the world and say with pride, "I am a Canadian."' ⁴⁶ In subsequent editorials, Ray Evans – the *Times's* editor whom Cook remembers as a 'tolerant' newspaperman but 'shaky' businessman – lamented Canada's residual 'Anglo-Saxon superiority complex', adding that the best answer to persistent prejudice was to banish the hyphen altogether: no longer should we 'tag ourselves as French-Canadians, Scotch-Canadians, Polish-Canadians, or other hyphenated Canadians'.⁴⁷ John Diefenbaker – then the member of parliament for Lake Centre, Saskatchewan, later the prime minister of Canada – agreed when, speaking in favour of the Act, he imagined an 'unhyphenated nation' premised on 'unity out of diversity'.⁴⁸

43 Roger Gibbins and Sonia Arrison, *Western Visions: Perspectives on the West in Canada* (Peterborough: Broadview, 1995), 46.

44 J.S. Woodsworth, *Strangers Within Our Gates* (Toronto: F.C. Stephenson, 1909), 203.

45 See James Pitsula, *Keeping Canada British: The Ku Klux Klan in 1920s Saskatchewan* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014). See also Jonathan Fine, 'Anti-Semitism in Manitoba and the 1930s and 40s', *Manitoba History*, 32 (1996), 26–33.

46 'Editorial', *Morden Times*, 11 December 1946; 'I Am a Canadian', *Morden Times*, 15 January 1947.

47 Ramsay Cook, email to author, 11 May 2015; 'Pride and Prejudice', *Morden Times*, 30 April 1947.

48 Quotation in Richard Sigurdson, 'John Diefenbaker's One Canada and the Legacy of Unhyphenated Canadianism', in D.C. Story and R. Bruce Shepard, eds, *The Diefenbaker Legacy* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1998), 75.

Russell Cook agreed as well, holding a special service at his church to mark the Act's coming into effect and, a few weeks later, becoming a Canadian citizen. He still subscribed to the *Methodist Recorder*, a British weekly; he listened to Churchill's speeches on the radio; and J.R. Green's *Short History of the English People* – a history not of Carlyle's great men but of the English people, of men like himself, 'figures little heeded' in conventional 'drum and trumpet history' – had a permanent place on the family bookshelf.⁴⁹ But after 34 years on the prairies, he had exchanged his broad accent for a flat accent and become a Canadian, adding that 'more should be made of the citizenship ceremony by the public'.⁵⁰ And because he saw himself as one more immigrant in a country full of immigrants, he never brandished his English birth, appeals to race being a political dead end.

In Raymore and Wynyard, Rev. Cook had opened his churches to any and all, from the Scottish farmer to the Chinese merchant.⁵¹ Where the Anglican Church – until 1955 the Church of England in Canada – tended to be ethnically English, the United Church was not, making it 'as Canadian as the maple leaf and the beaver'.⁵² And because welcoming 'newcomers to Canada' mattered to him, he would do the same thing in Morden, a town with many first-generation Canadians, or 'not-yet Canadians', to borrow W.O. Mitchell's phrase.⁵³ In 1948, Morden United hosted a special Kinsmen banquet honouring that year's recipient of its award for 'meritorious community service'. Mark Ki had come to Canada 46 years earlier, working first in British Columbia, at one point as a cook at the Sullivan Mine in Kimberley, before opening a small business in Morden in 1919, a common enough economic strategy for Chinese men on the prairies. He quickly integrated, joining the Morden Gun Club, taking up curling, giving his time and money to the Freemason's Hospital and in 1939 winning a contest for the best-decorated store window to celebrate the Royal Tour. When he received his citizenship award, the

49 J.R. Green, *A Short History of the English People* (London: Macmillan, 1888), xvii–xviii.

50 'Citizenship Court', *Morden Times*, 15 October 1947.

51 Ramsay Cook recalls that the Chinese restaurant owner in Wynyard joined his father's church. Ramsay Cook, email to author, 20 May 2015.

52 John Porter, *The Vertical Mosaic: An Analysis of Social Class and Power in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 519, doi.org/10.3138/9781442683044.

53 'About the Town', *Morden Times*, 1 June 1949; Mitchell, *Who*, 131.

Times praised his 'quiet, unostentatious doing of good deeds' and when, a few months later, he received his actual citizenship, it described the event as 'historic'.⁵⁴

Morden was not perfect. The 1947 ice carnival included 'squaws', 'braves', a 'chief', and a beautiful 'Indian maiden'; two years later, the carnival included a couple of boys in blackface on skates providing yet 'more laughs' to the 1,200 spectators; and the *Times* referred to the Japanese as Japs.⁵⁵ But Canada was not perfect either. The imagined Indian as a romantic figure doomed to disappear was everywhere; 'elements of blackface continued to appear until the early 1950s' in Canadian amateur music and theatre; and the *Globe and Mail* also referred to the Japanese as Japs.⁵⁶ Moreover, and to its credit, the *Times* described Canada's two languages as 'enriching', adding that the problem is not the French language, it is the 'holier-than-thou attitude adopted by many otherwise intelligent Canadians'.⁵⁷ A couple of years later, it ran a guest editorial marking the anniversary of Booker T. Washington's death that called Jim Crow a contradiction and an embarrassment to American leadership in the Cold War.⁵⁸ On balance, Morden was a decent town and as good a place as any to attend high school.

Ramsay Cook was now 15 years old, almost 16, and coming into his own physically, flexing his muscles, and discovering a passion for competition and testing himself through sports. School was easy. But sports demanded more from him. In Brandon he had joined the YMCA, learned to dive, and in 1946 won the provincial diving championship and the western Manitoba swimming championship. In Morden, he played hockey in the winter and baseball in the summer. But he also curled, ran the 100-yard dash and, when he was older, hung out at the local pool hall playing snooker and smoking what he and his friends called two-centers, a single cigarette sold for two cents by a Chinese shopkeeper.

54 'Mark Ki Receives Citizenship Award', *Morden Times*, 12 May 1948; 'Mark Ki Becomes Canadian Citizen at Local Court Sitting', *Morden Times*, 15 September 1948. See also Allison Marshall, *Cultivating Connections: The Making of Chinese Prairie Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014), 81–93. Mark Ki sold his business in 1948 and moved to Winnipeg, where he died in 1957. He lived a happier life than the Chinese restaurant owner in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, who commits suicide.

55 'Local Skaters', *Morden Times*, 12 March 1947; 'Ice Show of '49', *Morden Times*, 16 March 1949. Ramsay Cook participated in the 1949 ice carnival as one of the male skaters, but not in blackface.

56 Elaine Keillor, *Music in Canada: Capturing Landscape and Diversity* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), 163.

57 'Canadian Unity', *Morden Times*, 12 November 1947.

58 'Booker T. Washington', *Morden Times*, 30 November 1949.

Because the *Times* covered local sports almost religiously – a strike was not thrown and a goal was not scored without the *Times* reporting it – Cook became something of a local celebrity. After one baseball game, the *Times* described how ‘Speedy Ramsay’ had crossed the plate; after a hockey game, it reported that he had picked up an assist when ‘he carried the puck to the blue line’ and ‘dropped a pass’ to neatly set up an insurance goal; after another hockey game, it singled out his hat-trick in a ‘shellacking’ of Winkler, Morden’s great rival; and after a 16-rink high school bonspiel in Carman, readers learned that he and his teammates had brought home the ‘curling laurels’.⁵⁹ It is not clear when, because the articles were not signed, but Cook started working at the *Times* as a cub reporter on the sports beat as early as December 1948. Actually, one story was signed ‘GRC’, or George Ramsay Cook, almost certainly making it his first publication: do not worry, he told his readers, ‘the boys will be curling their best to keep the Sifton Trophy in Morden’.⁶⁰ For the next couple of years, the sports page was sprinkled with words like ‘razzle dazzle’, ‘thrills and spills’, ‘pucksters’, and ‘batsters’.

The *Times*’s coverage missed one element, though: intensely competitive, Cook often got into fights, a fact that did not go into his reporting. As one of the smallest boys, he used his size and speed to his advantage. If that did not work, he would drop the gloves, letting everyone know that he could not be pushed around. Of course, his parents were not amused, objecting ‘strenuously’.⁶¹ It was the same in baseball, although his best friend, Paul Sigurdson, managed to restrain him. Cook’s hero was Ted Williams, a player known for his bat *and* his temper. But he most resembled his other Boston hero, Dom DiMaggio, aka ‘The Little Professor’, because, like Cook, he was short and wore glasses.

By his own admission, Cook was a ‘desultory’ student.⁶² Because the curriculum was easy and grades came effortlessly, he ‘never worked’ because he did not have to.⁶³ Still, he won awards and prizes, receiving two Kinsmen scholarships in grade 10, one for the highest overall average

59 ‘Junior Ball Clubs Split Games on Labour Day’, *Morden Times*, 8 September 1948; ‘Morden Scholars Capture High School League Title’, *Morden Times*, 30 March 1949; ‘Hockey’, *Morden Times*, 12 January 1949; ‘Local High School Curlers Add More Conquests’, *Morden Times*, 25 February 1948.

60 GRC, ‘School Rinks Will Defend Sifton Cup’, *Morden Times*, 22 December 1948.

61 Ramsay Cook, email to author, 11 May 2015.

62 Ramsay Cook, ‘Who Broadened Canadian History?’ H. Sanford Riley Lecture, University of Winnipeg, 19 October 2009. Copy in possession of author.

63 Author’s interview with Ramsay Cook, 14 July 2014.

and the other for English and history.⁶⁴ Grades 11 and 12 were more of the same. He did little to no work, got good grades, but had no idea what he wanted to do, except maybe to work in Winnipeg at Baldy Northcott Sporting Goods. The ministry was never on the table and his parents never expected that of him. His brother, yes – in fact, the Raymore congregation had recommended him for the ministry. But with graduation approaching in the spring of 1950, and with his father pushing him to make a plan, Cook agreed to meet one of the lawyers in town, a friend of his father's, thinking maybe that would not be such a bad thing to be.

History did not interest him, especially after he had been condemned to read George Brown's mind-numbing but widely used textbook, *Building the Canadian Nation* – a title, Cook says, that pretty much 'described its contents'.⁶⁵ Relentlessly teleological, it was a standard account of discovery, exploration, settlement, colonial growth and nationhood. Canada from sea to sea was not 'forecast', Brown wrote, it was 'prophesied', making the prairies – once the 'Indians gave up their old way of life' – first colonies and later provinces, but never a focus, Manitoba appearing twice in the index, Saskatchewan and Alberta once.⁶⁶ To a kid at Maple Leaf Collegiate in Morden, Manitoba, especially a bright kid, history written from downtown Toronto could not 'but deceive and deceive cruelly'.⁶⁷

The spring of 1950 brought more than the end of high school when the Red River flooded, forcing the evacuation of some 70,000 people up and down the Red River valley, including 550 people from the small Franco-Manitoban village of St Jean who were taken to Morden where service organisations, churches and women's auxiliaries set up emergency shelters, arranged billets, gathered used clothing, collected old toys and made hundreds of sandwiches. As a member of a quickly convened Red Cross committee, Rev. Cook opened Morden United as a clearing station and dining room for the 'long cavalcade of trucks and cars' and people leaving St Jean.⁶⁸ Later he would be singled out by one of the many evacuees who, although 'foreign of language and faith', believed

64 'Graduation', *Morden Times*, 12 May 1948.

65 Cook, 'Who Broadened Canadian History?'

66 George W. Brown, *Building the Canadian Nation* (Toronto: Dent, 1942), 177, 336.

67 W.L. Morton, 'Clio in Canada: The Interpretation of Canadian History' (1946), reprinted in Carl Berger, ed., *Approaches to Canadian History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 47. 'Teaching inspired by the historical experience of metropolitan Canada', Morton argued, 'cannot but deceive, and deceive cruelly, children of the outlying sections.'

68 'Shelter 550 Evacuees Here', *Morden Times*, 17 May 1950.

that she had found 'unity and true socialism' in Morden.⁶⁹ The arrival of so many francophones – 'especially those of the opposite sex' – filled a young Ramsay Cook 'with both curiosity and a sense of adventure': 'there was something exotic about them'. Looking back, Cook now sees the flood as part of his discovery of French Canada. He had played hockey and baseball against teams from Letellier and St Norbert, which were 'positive, if sometimes bruising, meetings'. But the 1950 flood was 'more dramatic and personal'. Of course, there was no mention of bilingualism, biculturalism, founding nations or asymmetric federalism – unless, he jokes, those 'heated discussions' took place 'at the local beer parlour' – but there was enough innocent flirting to satisfy an 18-year-old boy.⁷⁰

On 27 May 1950, Cook graduated from high school in front of nearly 800 people packed into the Legion auditorium. In a 'well-delivered' valedictory address that 'held the attention of the audience', he told his peers to 'aim high', reminding them that 'a successful person is one who had done his best'. Despite his lousy study habits, he won the Governor General's Medal for his 'exceptional' marks, athletic accomplishments and popularity.⁷¹ He also won the languages prize, even if French was 'poorly taught' at Maple Leaf Collegiate.⁷²

That fall Cook left Morden to attend university and, although he did not know it then, he would never live in a small prairie town again. But he never resented where he had come from, or felt that he had been deprived because Raymore did not have an art gallery, or because Wynyard did not have a museum, or because Morden did not have a library. The prairies had something else: they had, he says looking back on his childhood, 'a lot of freedom'.⁷³ As long as he was home in time for supper, he was allowed to go to the edge of town, explore the fields, walk the stream beds and run beyond the next rise. In this, his childhood was like something out of *Who Has Seen the Wind* and its promise of wide open spaces to young boys whose hair was 'as bleached as the dead prairie grass itself'.⁷⁴ And it was like something out of Wallace Stegner's *Wolf Willow*, a memoir of growing

69 'St. Jean Evacuees Return to Flood Ruined Homes', *Morden Times*, 14 June 1950.

70 Ramsay Cook, 'Introduction', in Ramsay Cook, *Watching Quebec: Selected Essays* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), viii–ix. The sentence, 'there was something exotic about them', comes from author's interview with Ramsay Cook, 14 July 2014.

71 'G.A. Fitton, Brandon, Speaks to Grads Friday', *Morden Times*, 31 May 1950.

72 Cook, 'Introduction', *Watching Quebec*, ix.

73 Author's interview with Ramsay Cook, 14 July 2014.

74 Mitchell, *Who*, 11.

up in miniscule Eastend, Saskatchewan, a place he called a 'kid's paradise'. Using the metaphor of imprinting – that phase 'in the development of birds, when an impression lasting only a few seconds may be imprinted on the young bird for life' – Stegner believed to his last days that he too had been imprinted, or 'marked by the space and geography of the plains'.⁷⁵

The prairies marked Cook in the same way, imprinting an abiding love and need for nature, the outdoors, wildlife and especially birds. As a 10-year-old boy in Wynyard, he learned to identify the prairies' many birds – the meadow lark, the northern goshawk and the western tanager – using a simple guide book; he spent the money he earned as a paper boy on bird pictures from the Audubon society; and he 'collected birds' eggs, blew the yolks out and, with his hands scratched and dirty from a day spent free, 'carefully stored the shells in a sawdust-filled box', his own cabinet of curiosities. 'I always claimed that I collected only one egg per species, but I often found what I decided was a better example in some gopher-skin-strewn hawk's nest high in a tree.'⁷⁶

For these reasons and more, Cook reacted quickly and viscerally to a 1974 book that he felt looked down on small prairie towns like the ones that had made him, and he let the author have it in a review written with what he called, quoting Stegner, the 'angry defensiveness of the native son'. At this point a full professor at York University, Cook turned *Grass Roots* upside down. The Winklers, Biggars and Miamis were not stuck in the past; they were stuck in the present. It was the car, television and chain stores that were turning their main streets dusty and tired. And while he acknowledged that these towns and villages could be 'pinched and prejudiced', they could be 'attractive' and 'humane' too. 'The devoted school teacher can still be found,' he said, 'and the doctor who'll make a house call when asked' and 'lawyers and merchants who know when a bill shouldn't be collected'. As well, there are clergymen like his father 'who have never heard of [Marshall] McLuhan but who help people who are lonely or alcoholic or just mixed up'.⁷⁷ Forty years later, it is still one of his favourite reviews, precisely because it was defensive and

75 Wallace Stegner, *Wolf Willow* (New York: Viking, 1962), 21. For Stegner's reference to Eastend as a 'kid's paradise', see Page Stegner, ed., *The Selected Letters of Wallace Stegner* (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker Hoard, 2007), 118. For Stegner's reference to having been 'marked by the space and geography of the plains', see Jackson J. Benson, *Wallace Stegner: His Life and Works* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 31.

76 Ramsay Cook, email to author, 23 May 2015.

77 Ramsay Cook, review of *Grass Roots* by Heather Robertson, in *Canadian Forum* (March 1974), 43.

therefore honest. In the end, Cook's experience was Margaret Laurence's experience. When thinking about her hometown of Neepawa, Manitoba, she admitted that it could be an 'isolated hell'. But it could be 'a place of incredible happenings, splendours, and revelations', and for the longest time that 'settlement and that land' were 'my only real knowledge of the planet'; it was, she said, 'where my world began'.⁷⁸

The prairies were not a hinterland to the commercial empire of the St Lawrence River. They were Ramsay Cook's only real knowledge of the planet and the place where his world began. But that was about to change.

IV

It never crossed my mind, when young, that I might
become a professional historian.

— A.J.P. Taylor

Winnipeg was still the largest city on the prairies when Cook began his studies at United College in 1950. It was also the most tolerant as the 'old barriers between ethnic groups' fell and 'the once impregnable fortress of British-Canadian culture was undermined' by 'an evolving, plural approach to questions of identity'. Of course, Winnipeg had been a diverse city since its beginnings, but in the postwar period its civic leaders displayed an 'increasing openness to newcomers'. Forty years earlier, Woodsworth had asked how a 'heterogeneous mass' might be welded 'into one people'. The answer, most of Winnipeg's citizens now believed, lay in pluralism and 'a determined effort' to build bridges across ethnicity, religion and language.⁷⁹ Cook remembers United College, then a couple of buildings on Portage Avenue at Good Street, as a place where kids with Jewish, Ukrainian, Polish, German, Scandinavian and West Indian backgrounds went to classes and shared a dormitory with kids from English, Scottish and Irish backgrounds. Although Winnipeg was New York City compared to Raymore, Wynyard and Morden, and although United College, with 1,500 students, was enormous compared to Maple

78 Margaret Laurence, 'Where the World Began', in Laurence, *Heart of a Stranger* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976), 213, 219.

79 Royden Loewen and Gerald Friesen, *Immigrants in Prairie Cities: Ethnic Diversity in Twentieth-Century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 92, 78. 'Winnipeg', Allison Marshall writes, 'was a more tolerant place to live than many other cities in Western Canada'. Marshall, *Cultivating Connections*, 11.

Leaf Collegiate, a four-room, four-grade high school, they all shared one defining characteristic: cultural diversity. Thinking about his childhood and adolescence, Cook is not sure that he ever lived in a town that had a majority British population. Actually, every town did, but that is not the point. Rather, his memory is. Ethnic, religious and linguistic difference, or multiculturalism, although that word had not been invented yet, was 'the normal state of things' on the prairies.⁸⁰

Initially, Cook did not want to study history, thinking instead that first-year chemistry would be more interesting. After the 'insufferably boring' history that he had been compelled to sit through at Maple Leaf Collegiate, he would have watched paint dry if he could get credit for it. But when the assistant registrar explained that taking chemistry necessitated 'thrice weekly bus trips to the Fort Garry campus of the University of Manitoba', he said thanks but no thanks. She then suggested the American history survey, adding that the department had 'an excellent reputation'. Maybe it did, but Cook did not care about things like that. He cared about the classroom – a five-minute walk across campus. 'On such weighty considerations my career choice was made, though I did not suspect it at the time.'⁸¹

United College's Department of History was small, just three full-time professors, but it was the centre of the Arts Faculty and, in a way, of the university because its members were tough-minded men with strong opinions who were not afraid to stick their necks out.⁸² And they were wonderful teachers who pushed their students to think for themselves and make connections between the past and the present. Where George Brown had killed the past, Harry Crowe, Ken McNaught and Stewart Reid brought it back to life. Cook loved it and although he 'had no conception of what historians did for a living', he quickly shelved his plans for law school.⁸³ The next four years saw him grow intellectually, push his mind and discover its reaches, broaden his horizons and debate the world.

80 The 1931 and 1941 censuses confirm that Alameda, Raymore, Wynyard and Morden had more 'British Races' than other 'Races', although the 1941 census identified 427 Britons and 408 Scandinavians in Wynyard. Cook, 'Introduction', *Watching Quebec*, viii.

81 Cook, 'Introduction', *Watching Quebec*, ix.

82 Kenneth McNaught, *Conscience and History: A Memoir* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 89. For example, in 1953, Kenneth McNaught, Harry Crowe and Stewart Reid formed the United College Association, a faculty association, with the goal of securing faculty representation on the Board of Regents and improving salaries. See also Michiel Horn, *Academic Freedom in Canada: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), doi.org/10.3138/9781442670570.

83 Cook, 'Who Broadened Canadian History?'

The *Morden Times* had made a handful of references to famine in China and polio in India, but it was more interested in Princess Elizabeth's engagement to Lieutenant Philip Mountbatten, the royal wedding and the birth of Prince Charles. At United College, Cook discovered that the world was bigger than the royal family and that history was the key to unlocking it. The Cold War and the Korean War; Israel and the Arab states; McCarthy and the Rosenbergs: it was an exciting time to be a student of history.

Crowe, McNaught and Reid took an interest in young people, hosting meetings of the History Club in their homes and inviting students to Tony's, the campus cafeteria and coffee shop in the basement of Wesley Hall next to the ancient boiler room. With 'a semi-permanent cigarette drooping from his mouth', Crowe would hold forth on politics, especially American politics, while students sat transfixed.⁸⁴ The senior senator from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy, was a favourite target. Often McNaught would join Crowe, and together they would solve the world's problems. When the conversation turned to history, they would refer to the Winnipeg General Strike as class warfare and not, as George Brown had, simply the result of postwar unemployment. Every now and then, Reid would show up, turning the conversation to British politics, decolonisation, the National Health Service and especially the Labour Party, the subject of his doctoral thesis. A crusty Scot, Reid was 'argumentative' and 'disagreed' with everyone but, like Crowe and McNaught, 'he was a *really good* teacher'.⁸⁵

Captivated, Cook began to see himself in his professors, thinking that they led interesting lives. The coffee, cigarettes and conversations also confirmed and strengthened his growing interest in civil liberties. So when a law student wrote a column in the college newspaper criticising those 'propagandists' and 'fellow travellers' who would rail at witch hunts and threats to academic freedom but disdain America's leadership in the 'crucial struggle of our time', he responded. If only one professor is intimidated – or worse, hounded – it is one too many, Cook said. McCarthyism, he added, is a 'manifestation of a certain type of thought' in American politics – which Richard Hofstadter would identify later as the paranoid style – but there is another type of thought in American politics, Cook noted,

84 Ramsay Cook, *The Teeth of Time: Remembering Pierre Elliott Trudeau* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), 98.

85 Emphasis not mine. Author's interview with Ramsay Cook, 14 July 2014. Fifteen or so years later, Cook dedicated a collection of essays 'To the Memory of J.H.S. Reid'. See Ramsay Cook, *Canada and the French-Canadian Question* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1966).

stretching from Jefferson to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and it is in this tradition 'that the hope of western democracy lies'. Not to be outdone, the law student responded in kind, thanking Cook for confirming his thesis that every 'self-righteous pseudo-intellectual' believes that he is heir to Jefferson yet this same 'left-wing thinker' has nothing to say about the 'millions' of victims and 'proposed victims' of communism. Still the competitive kid who never backed down from a fight against some hayseed from Winkler, Cook hit back: congressional committees are one thing, but 'kangaroo courts' are another, and academic freedom is too important to be left in the hands of 'cowards' and 'character assassins'.⁸⁶ The exchange ended in a draw, but Cook had discovered the letter-to-the-editor, which became a favourite medium for usually quick, occasionally sustained, often ironic, but always forthright commentary.

In addition to its informal sessions at Tony's, the Department of History organised an annual exchange on some aspect of international relations with Macalester College in St Paul, Minnesota: United College faculty and students would go down one year, Macalester faculty and students would come up the next. To Cook, it was heady stuff and in the spring of 1953 he was selected to give a presentation, which meant that summer he had to prepare a paper on 'the problem of peace in the Middle East', as well as fertilise sunflowers and corn at the Morden Experimental Farm. In his self-deprecating way, he now likes to remind people that, in case they are wondering, he failed to find a solution, but the paper contains the first expression of what became two of the animating themes of his career: a distrust of nationalism and a commitment to liberalism. Drawing on articles in *The Nation* and *The New Statesman*, two left journals, he asserted that the record of the West in the Middle East is the record of generals, oil executives and Coca-Cola salesmen, making it 'a record of conquest, broken promises, expediency, and exploitation'. Meanwhile, local elites draw on the language of nationalism and national self-determination to advance their own narrow class interests, transforming 'the foreigner' into 'the whipping boy' and deflecting attention from persistent social and economic inequality. But it is the intractable 'misery of the people',

86 The 1953 exchange took place in the *Manitoban*, the student newspaper of the University of Manitoba, but was reprinted in *The Brown and Gold*, the Manitoba yearbook. See *The Brown and Gold*, 1954, University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections.

Cook concluded, that must be addressed by policies rooted in the 'liberal principles' of 'liberty, equality, and fraternity' if the place that 'gave birth to Western civilization' is not also to become its 'graveyard'.⁸⁷

In his fourth year, Cook had the opportunity to study with a visiting professor, William Rose, whose courses in Eastern European history and Eastern European nationalism were unlike anything he had taken before. Rose himself was a fascinating man whose life read like something out of a novel: a poor farm boy from Minnedosa, Manitoba, he went to Oxford on a Rhodes Scholarship and then Leipzig to do a PhD, but the First World War interrupted his studies and he found himself interned in Poland as an enemy alien of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He quickly learned the language, fell in love with the culture and, when the war ended, did a PhD in Poland on Polish history, becoming a key interpreter of Eastern and Central Europe to Great Britain when he was named director of the School of Slavonic Studies at the University of London.⁸⁸ Now retired and nearly 70 years old, Rose returned to his alma mater and took his Winnipeg students beyond Britain and France to that part of Europe where Clifford Sifton's 'stalwart peasant in a sheepskin coat' and his 'stout wife' had come from – where, for some of them, their parents and grandparents had come from.⁸⁹

As he did in all of his courses, Cook jumped in with both feet, 'struggling to pronounce Eastern European names and to distinguish between Pan Slavs and Slavophiles'.⁹⁰ But Rose was a patient teacher – 'very fatherly' and 'very kind' – and when he delivered a public lecture – in a subfusc in the tradition of Oxford and Cambridge – Cook sold copies of his books at the back of the hall.⁹¹ As both a historian and commentator on current events, Rose saw nationalism as a positive force, leading to national independence and the end of empire. Polish nationalism, he believed, could be a force even for moral regeneration. Cook was not convinced. After all, he had studied with Crowe, McNaught and Reid, all socialists who distrusted the nation as a bourgeois deceit and instead pinned their hopes on

87 Ramsay Cook, 'Nationalism in the Middle East', *Vox Wesleyana*, 1954, University of Winnipeg Archives, AC-9-27.

88 See Daniel Stone, 'William Rose, Manitoba Historian', *Manitoba Historical Society Transactions*, Series 3, 31 (1974–75) and Daniel Stone, ed., *The Polish Memoirs of William John Rose* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975).

89 Quotation in Brown and Cook, *A Nation Transformed*, 63.

90 Cook, 'Introduction', *Watching Quebec*, x.

91 Author's interview with Ramsay Cook, 14 July 2014.

internationalism. Besides, he was a kid from the prairies with, in his words, 'an instinctive suspicion that what passed as nation-building in Ontario' was really 'industrial tariff protection' to be paid for by the western farmer in the form of more expensive farm machinery.⁹² As part of his courses with Rose, Cook read Johann Gottfried Herder, the eighteenth-century German philosopher and intellectual father of nationalism, who insisted that the nation consisted of a people, or *volk*, with a shared ethnicity and language, and, in turn, that the nation was the natural basis of the state. Reading Herder against the backdrop of 'the Second World War and the destruction of most of Europe's Jews', and reading him on the prairies that did not have, and never would have, a shared ethnicity, Cook, frankly, 'disliked him'.⁹³ Still, Rose taught him that nationalism was a force in history that could be its own field of study.

Encouraged by his professors, especially by Ken McNaught who recognised something pretty special in him, Cook decided to pursue graduate work, either at Toronto or Queen's.⁹⁴ Toronto had a bigger program, but Queen's offered a bigger scholarship. And he now thought that he might like to work in Ottawa, in the Department of External Affairs, where the action was and where the bright and ambitious set their sights. Cook was both, but his ambition was not crass and he was not a young man on the make. Money, status and rank did not matter to him. Ideas did, and he was increasingly drawn to a life of the mind. He had found in history a new language that could be a moral language because it included questions of right and wrong, making it, he said many years later, 'an essential component of a developing moral imagination'.⁹⁵ History compels the writer to enter the lives of real people and to see them as men and women struggling, striving, succeeding, failing, doing good things and sometimes doing very bad things. In short, it compels the writer to walk a mile in someone else's shoes, which is the essence of a moral imagination.

92 Cook, 'Who Broadened Canadian History?'

93 Cook, 'Introduction', *Watching Quebec*, x. Guy Laforest believes that Cook misread Herder and was too quick to dismiss nationalism, believing that 'une autre lecture, plus nuancée, de la pensée herdérienne et de la nature du nationalisme dans le monde contemporain' is possible. Of course, Laforest has never agreed with Cook. See Guy Laforest, 'Herder, Kedourie et les errements de l'antinationalisme du Canada', in Raymond Hudon and Réjean Pelletier, eds, *L'engagement intellectuel: Mélanges en honneur de Léon Dion* (Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1991).

94 In his memoirs, Ken McNaught fondly remembered Ramsay Cook as a bright student who 'let me get away with nothing'. McNaught, *Conscience and History*, 85.

95 Ramsay Cook, 'Identities Are Not Like Hats', *Canadian Historical Review*, 81:2 (2000), 260.

Understood as a moral discipline, history was replacing religion in Cook's life. Attending Sunday school, singing in the church choir, listening to his father's sermons and watching his mother leave the house to attend yet another meeting of the Women's Association, the Women's Missionary Society or Canadian Girls in Training gave him an ethical and moral compass, a sense of obligation and service. As the son of a United Church minister and a United Church minister's wife, he had learnt right from wrong in his childhood and adolescence, but now in his early 20s, he felt his faith recede to the point where he became an agnostic. Neither epiphanic nor sudden, it was a process with no clear beginning and no clear ending. He did not, like Michael Bliss, one day take a shower, decide that God was a 'superstitious invention', and watch his faith go down the drain.⁹⁶ At some point, though, he decided that the answers to questions of equality and inequality, tolerance and intolerance, nationalism, patriotism, self-determination, identity and minority rights, would be found in the archives, not in the Sermon on the Mount, while answers to questions of life and death would be found not in the Psalms of David but in the poetry of T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats, and in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, ultimately a novel about the unalterable mystery of death.⁹⁷

V

Canada is a supreme act of faith.

— Arthur Lower

Every generation had to work out Canada's reason for being, according to Arthur Lower. For him, that reason was a nation independent of Great Britain, separate from the United States, neither English nor French, but united by history and geography, by the shared historical experience of living on the northern half of North America. 'You can call it nonsense', he wrote, 'you can call it what you will', but nationalism gives 'form and substance to the vague and formless': 'I have faith that we will win through,

96 Ramsay Cook, email to author, 15 May 2015. Michael Bliss had been studying for the ministry and even had a mission field in the Northwest Territories, but during a long shower in the fall of 1961, he became a lifelong sceptic. See Michael Bliss, *Writing History: A Professor's Life* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2011), 94.

97 See Ramsay Cook, 'Donald Creighton: Tribute to a Scholar', *University of Toronto Bulletin*, 25 February 1980; and Cook, *The Teeth of Time*.

that Canada is not a mere name' on some world map.⁹⁸ Lower could have never guessed that the 'brilliant young man' with the mop of red hair who had come from Manitoba to work with him in the fall of 1954 would call it nonsense and, within five or six years, emerge as one of the key figures in the articulation and defence of a new reason for being.⁹⁹ And Ramsay Cook could not have known that the formidable figure who had agreed to supervise his MA thesis would introduce him to a subject that, 60 years later, still fascinates him.

Lower co-taught a seminar on French Canada. From behind stacks of paper, he emphasised French-Canadian culture while Fred Gibson, who never knew when to stop, covered French-Canadian politics. Cook loved it. Ken McNaught had made Canada interesting, but here was a part of the country that Cook barely knew existed and that was on the cusp of something revolutionary. Quebec's traditional, defensive and Catholic nationalists were being challenged by a new generation of neo-nationalists who talked about a modern, bureaucratic, secular Quebec that was master in its own house. It was a lively seminar: Lower, who had the 'hide of an elephant', lived for the fight and expected his students to challenge the generalisations that he lobbed into a seminar for effect; and Gibson, who knew everything there was to know about national politics from having worked in Ottawa at what was then the Public Archives and as an assistant to Mackenzie King in the sorting of his papers, was a 'very demanding teacher'.¹⁰⁰ He was also a fun teacher because he knew where the bodies were buried and how to tell a good story. Later, Gibson hired Cook as a research assistant for a project on the 1909 to 1911 naval debate, which had broken along linguistic lines, pitting English-speaking Canadians who believed Canada had a duty to the mother country against French-speaking Canadians who foresaw Canada being dragged into Britain's wars. In short, the naval debate was the clash of two nationalisms.¹⁰¹ The seed had been sown and Cook was nearing one of the key insights of his career: Canada's problem was not too little nationalism, it was too much.

98 Arthur Lower, Diary, 23 February 1964, Queen's University Archives, Arthur Lower fonds, 5072, box 57, E75.

99 Arthur Lower, *My First Seventy-Five Years* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1967), 324. On Cook as a public intellectual, see Patrice A. Dutil, 'Ramsay Cook's Quest for an Intellectual "Phoenix," 1960–1968', in Behiels and Martel, *Nation, Ideas, Identities*.

100 Author's interview with Ramsay Cook, 14 July 2014.

101 See Brown and Cook, *Canada, 1896–1921*, ch. 13 'The Clash of Nationalisms'.

That seminar and that research taught him something else: French Canadians were not 'one minority among many' and they could claim rights that, for example, Ukrainian Canadians could not. The Ukrainians had become Canadians by choice; the French had become Canadians by conquest.¹⁰² Equality, he realised, was not sameness and equal treatment was not the same treatment. And if groups could be treated equally *and* differently, then French language and education rights were compatible with equality, not contradictory. John Diefenbaker's unhyphenated Canadian could never include French Canadians, especially French Canadians outside of Quebec, because the hyphen was all that stood between them and assimilation. At Lower's urging, Cook became a faithful reader of *Le Devoir*, Quebec's newspaper of record edited by the neo-nationalist André Laurendeau. Then a classmate introduced him to *Cité Libre*, a small, left-liberal, anti-clerical, pro-labour journal edited by an up-and-coming intellectual named Pierre Trudeau. Laurendeau and *Le Devoir*; Trudeau and *Cité Libre*; neo-nationalists on the one hand, Citélibristes on the other: although he did not fully appreciate it, Cook had a front row seat at the prelude to the Quiet Revolution. 'My interest in Quebec was born at Queen's', he now says.¹⁰³

Cook shared something else with his thesis supervisor: a commitment to liberalism and a concern for what had happened during the Second World War when 21,000 Japanese Canadians were interned and basic civil liberties were mocked by a security state. Because Lower had been a founding member and first chair of the Civil Liberties Association of Winnipeg in the 1940s, he was able to give Cook access to his personal papers and put him in touch with F.R. Scott, the McGill law professor and longtime champion of civil liberties in a province plagued by a reactionary and corrupt government, and with Andrew Brewin, the Toronto lawyer who had led the legal fight against the planned deportation of Japanese Canadians after the war.¹⁰⁴ A 'taskmaster', Lower also instructed Cook to look for the forest and not just the trees, to look beyond the minutes of meetings, press reports and parliamentary debates by reading widely in

102 Cook, 'Introduction', *Watching Quebec*, x–xi.

103 Author's interview with Ramsay Cook, 14 July 2014. See Michael Behiels, *Prelude to the Quiet Revolution: Liberalism vs Neo-Nationalism, 1945–1960* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985).

104 For the history of civil liberties in Canada, see Christopher MacLennan, *Toward the Charter: Canadians and the Demand for a National Bill of Rights, 1929–1960* (Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003) and Dominique Clément, *Canada's Rights Revolution: Social Movements and Social Change, 1937–1982* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008).

the history of liberal thought. Using the Douglas Library's card catalogue, Cook went into the stacks where he read the Magna Carta's promise 'that there exists a rule of law and that everyone, including the King, must be governed by it'; he studied the seventeenth-century's vindication of liberty in the Habeas Corpus Act and the Bill of Rights; and he read A.V. Dicey's insistence that freedom was dependent on parliamentary sovereignty, an independent judiciary and the rule of law.¹⁰⁵

However, one book shone above the others, as if it cast a great light. Lord Acton's *History of Freedom and Other Essays* confirmed Cook's experience growing up on Clifford Sifton's prairies and now his experience studying French Canada. The schools in Raymore, Wynyard, Brandon and Morden, the lectures, seminars and bull sessions at United College, the coffee and cigarettes at Tony's, and the debates over Canada and the French-Canadian question at Queen's came together in a moment of clarity. A nation founded on 'race', Acton said, is a nation founded on 'a fictitious unity'; the idea that the 'State and nation must be co-extensive' is a lie; and the 'divided patriotism' stemming from 'the presence of different nations under the same sovereignty' is not a bad thing, it is a good thing because it resists 'centralisation', 'corruption' and 'absolutism': 'The co-existence of several nations under the same State is a test, as well as the best security, of its freedom.'¹⁰⁶ 'On first reading Acton, I thought of Canada', Cook said many years later.¹⁰⁷

Opening with a nod to Lord Acton, 'Canadian Liberalism in Wartime' argues that Canadian liberalism had been encouraged by the presence of two main cultures, although it still remains vulnerable to governments in both wartime and peacetime: the War Measures Act in the First World War was an obvious example, as were the amendments to the Immigration Act and the Criminal Code to deal with the Winnipeg General Strike. The Second World War again saw the federal government use the War Measures Act and the Defence of Canada Regulations to intimidate,

105 Ramsay Cook, 'Canadian Liberalism in Wartime: A Study of the Defence of Canada Regulations and Some Canadian Attitudes to Civil Liberties in Wartime, 1939-1945' (MA thesis, Queen's University, 1955), iii, 11. Nineteen years later, he published a version of his thesis in a *festschrift* to his supervisor and friend. See Ramsay Cook, 'Canadian Freedom in Wartime, 1939-1945', in W.H. Heick and Roger Graham, eds, *His Own Man: Essays in Honour of Arthur Reginald Marsden Lower* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1974).

106 Lord Acton, 'On Nationality', in John E.E. Dalberg Acton, *The History of Freedom and Other Essays* (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 288, 285, 289, 290.

107 Cook, *The Teeth of Time*, 12. Another Manitoba historian, W.L. Morton, also found Lord Acton's insights helpful to understanding Canada. See Morton, 'Clio in Canada'.

silence, jail and, in the case of the Japanese, intern. The removal of the Japanese Canadians from their homes and the disposal of their property at fire sale prices was, Cook wrote, a 'flagrant abuse' made possible by years of 'strong prejudice', wartime hysteria and the government's assumption of 'arbitrary powers'. The internment confirmed the dictum, he wrote, that 'once a government is allowed to assume extraordinary powers it will use them'. While there were important voices of dissent in the press, parliament, organised labour and civil liberties associations, why were they so few in number? Why were such 'illiberal security regulations' met with such 'silence'? Because, he concluded, Canada did not have an eighteenth century, meaning Canadian liberalism had been inherited, not won. Later, in the last third of the nineteenth century and opening decade of the twentieth century, railways and tariffs were the great national questions. 'With tangible economic questions rather than abstract constitutional points the main concern of Canadians, our Burkes and Foxes have been Galts and Siftons.'¹⁰⁸

An impressive piece of research and writing for a 23-year-old graduate student, 'Canadian Liberalism in Wartime' is also moving: Cook's childhood friend, the little boy who had taught him how to fish, would have been interned along with his family, their property seized and effectively given away. Of the 'several blots' left on Canadian liberalism by 'wartime security regulations', the 'case of Japanese Canadians' is 'the blackest'. Perhaps this explains his anger, restrained and academic, but present between the lines. Once conceived as a moral discipline, historians must be prepared 'to pass judgment', Cook argued, sounding not unlike his parents. The apple had not fallen all that far from the tree after all. Cook's judgement of a government that allowed internal security to trump civil liberties *and* of Canadians that failed to stop that government and its technocrats, that had allowed liberalism to become 'chamber of commerce oratory', was quick and unambiguous.¹⁰⁹ And on that note, he closed his thesis in the same way that he had opened it, with a nod to Lord Acton: 'Liberty is not a means to a political end. It is itself the highest political end.'¹¹⁰

108 Cook, 'Canadian Liberalism in Wartime', 233, 237, 278, 279.

109 Ibid., 238, 268, 270. His point about the apathy of Canadians was confirmed at his thesis defence in the fall of 1955 when the chair, a distinguished Queen's mathematician, admitted that 'he had lived through the war without ever knowing that the War Measures Act or the Defence of Canada Regulations existed'. Ramsay Cook, email to author, 29 May 2015.

110 Acton, *The History of Freedom and Other Essays*, 22.

Cook began his PhD at the University of Toronto in the fall of 1955 and in time became the leading historian and public intellectual of his generation by developing the themes in his MA thesis – equality, minority rights, anti-nationalism and the benefits of what Lord Acton called ‘divided patriotism’. But have I committed the biographer’s sin, the one Cook cautioned me against when he told me to read *The Rise of the Indian Rope Trick* by Peter Lamont? Has my reconnaissance – carried out at moment in history when security concerns mean that even the Supreme Court of Canada can hold a secret hearing – determined what evidence I found and how I interpreted it? Maybe. But that is the question all biographers confront. And is my biographical reconnaissance of Ramsay Cook not Ramsay Cook in the same way that Magritte’s pipe is not a pipe? Yes, of course: the problem of biography is the problem of Magritte’s pipe. Then why write biography? Because like the rise of the Indian rope trick, it is ‘a victory of imagination over reality’.¹¹¹

111 Lamont, *The Rise of the Indian Rope Trick*, 232.

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