

REMEMBER WHERE WE CAME FROM: VIRTUE AND EXHORTATION

IN THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF GALT

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Introduction

Several years ago, I wrote a master's thesis on the significance of Galt for the study of a particular event in Canadian religious history—the so-called church union of 1925. In order to provide a brief introductory survey of Galt's history, I mined the appropriate books about the city until I had found, put simply, enough information to fill a thesis-chapter. Looking back, I realize that I did not interact very well with those authors—like James Young, Andrew W. Taylor, Kenneth McLaughlin and Jim Quantrell—who had ventured previously to tell Galt's story. In all honesty, I do not think I took these local histories as seriously as I did those written on other topics pertinent to my research. Since that time, I have developed a greater sensitivity to the nuances and complexity, in any context, of the historical method and to the delicate role of writers in shaping historical consciousness, no matter who the author is and what her subject. In this paper, I will summarize and review Galt's most important histories, and provide an introduction to the writers, named above, who produced them. By so doing, it is my desire to make others aware of the wonderful authors who have preserved, thus far, the city's

history. In comparing the similarities of their histories of Galt and contrasting their differences, further, I hope to encourage more intelligent reading of their work and, ultimately, to stimulate my fellow historians to write as clearly and cogently as possible. Where the historians of Galt have promoted civic pride and the virtues which have made the city a good place to live and work, though sometimes only implicitly, I wish to encourage good reading and writing of all kinds of history because these skilful endeavours lead to clear thinking and honesty—two virtues of which our society has, in any context, an ongoing need.

Galt's Historians and Their Work

James Young

James Young (1835-1913), author of an invaluable book on Galt's early decades, is a figure woven intricately into the city's historical fabric. The son of John Young, an early settler, James attended the Gouinlock and Tassie Schools. At age 14, he began working for the *Galt Reporter*. At age 18, he bought the rival *Dumfries Reformer* and ran that newspaper for a decade. Young sat on the town council several times between 1858 and 1884. In 1867, he was elected to the House of Commons, as a member of the Liberal Party, and held his seat until 1878. Following his defeat, he took the opportunity, at the suggestion of many, to write his *Reminiscences of the Early History of Galt and the Settlement of Dumfries*, in 1879.¹ From 1879 until 1886, he sat in the provincial legislature as the member for Brant North. In the latter years of his life, Young remained active in his support of the Liberal Party and sat on

¹ James Young, *Reminiscences of the Early History of Galt and the Settlement of Dumfries* (Toronto: Hunter, Rose and Company, 1880), iii.

many boards, including the Galt Collegiate Institute Board of Trustees, the Galt Hospital Trust and the Gore Mutual Fire Insurance Company.²

Although much more could be said about the life and thought of this significant figure in Canadian history, our focus here is on Young's *Reminiscences*. Simply put, this book is a treasure. Preserving early and detailed accounts of life in Galt, to approximately the 1860s, it is the foundation on which all subsequent histories of the city have been based. Written in readable (but dated) prose, Young narrates an extended series of stories which range from the historically significant (the construction of highways 24 and 8) to the simply amusing (a bear chased from the 'downtown' in 1834). The author makes good use of his unique vantage point to describe early memories of Galt and its residents as well as to connect the same with important events and figures in the wider Canadian context. Lacking a grand organizing principle, the *Reminiscences* are just that, a series of recollections and anecdotes which are sometimes carried forward for the benefit of advancing an argument and which are, at other times, simply left behind to delight the next reader. Though the text sometimes gives the impression of a collage, rather than a focused scene, Young is able to make it work with his humour and his knack for good story-telling.

A noteworthy aspect of the *Reminiscences* is the author's awareness of his role in the-shaping-of-historical-consciousness-as-a-writer-of-history. Young is quite clear about his varied reasons for writing: to preserve the "fast-fading Reminiscences" of Galt's early days, to provide amusement for himself and others, to honour the pioneers of Galt (and other communities) as the "true heroes" of Canadian history as well as to tout the city as a place of impressive natural beauty, commerce and culture. Even more significant for his readers, is Young's promotion of "industry and thrift," virtues that,

² Jim Quantrell, *Cambridge Mosaic: An Inquiry into Who's Who in the History of Cambridge* (Cambridge, ON: City of Cambridge Archives, 1998), 234-235.

he believed, built the community and which, he argues, would need to be preserved if the prosperity of Galt was to continue.³

Andrew W. Taylor

Andrew W. Taylor (1907-1986) is one of the most prolific historians of the Waterloo region. Like Young, Taylor was descended from Galt's early settlers and, in fact, he continued to work the farm that his ancestors had established, in 1819. Taylor received the best education the area could offer, first at Central Public School, then at Galt Collegiate Institute and, finally, at the Ontario Agricultural College, in Guelph. In addition to his farming, Taylor worked for the township of North Dumfries, for a period, as an assessor, tax collector and building inspector. The study of history, and its promotion, was always dear to Taylor. He was involved heavily in organizations like the Waterloo Historical Society, the Ontario Historical Society, the Ontario Pioneer Community Foundation and the Doon Pioneer Village. He was also active in various agricultural associations in the area.⁴

Among Taylor's historical works are several articles published by the Waterloo Historical Society and three books. One of his books, *Banners Unfurled*, is a very well done history of First United Church. In addition, he penned two editions of a community history: *Our Yesterdays*, written to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Township of North Dumfries, and *Our Todays and Yesterdays*, produced to mark the Canadian centennial.⁵ For students of the history of Galt and its surrounding area, Taylor's two community histories are extremely valuable. Neither *Our Yesterdays* nor *Our Today's and Yesterdays* can replace Young's *Reminiscences*. However, Taylor's later vantage point gives his readers a wider-angled

³ Young, *Reminiscences*, 271-272.

⁴ Quantrell, *Cambridge Mosaic*, 208-209.

⁵ Andrew W. Taylor, *Our Yesterdays* (Municipality of North Dumfries, 1952) and *Our Todays and Yesterdays* (Published for the North Dumfries and Ayr Centennial Committee, 1967).

view of significant events in Galt's early history. His writing style and structure are also more current and more accessible to modern readers.

In both editions of his community history, Taylor takes a very systematic approach to his presentation. Both begin with a section on the geology of the area and the period prior to European settlement and then move to discuss different themes in a chronological fashion. Although Taylor does not offer an extended argument which might offer more unity to his work, he uses a variety of heading types to delineate different parts of his narrative and to keep it all from simply blending together. In general, it might be suggested that Taylor moves his work from the physical geography of the area, to settlement and the establishment of local government, to the development of local civic organizations before concluding with some anecdotal stories.

Both *Our Yesterdays* and *Our Todays and Yesterdays* were, in a real sense, community projects. Both include written contributions from other individuals and, as a result, suffer from a weakened sense of narrative unity. What these books lack in style of presentation, however, they certainly make up for in content. They offer a treasure trove of otherwise obscure information on all manner of subjects, from the type of taxation faced by the earliest settlers and the structure of their earliest local government to the development of roads and subdivisions which have become home to more recent residents.

Taylor does not state clearly his purpose for writing a history of Galt and Dumfries, as Young does. Yet, a strong sense of purpose seems implicit. Where Young credits the hard work and thrift of the pioneers, Taylor seems to place a strong emphasis on the work of local government in bringing order, prosperity and freedom to the wilderness.⁶ Much like Young, on the other hand, he hopes that his

⁶ Taylor, *Our Todays and Yesterdays*, 9.

historical writing will help to pass on the enduring values of the past to “present and future generations.”⁷

Kenneth McLaughlin

Kenneth McLaughlin’s (1943-) contribution to the historiography of Galt comes from his fine book, *Cambridge: The Making of a Canadian City*.⁸ As the dust jacket of the book suggests, he was “uniquely suited” to write a history of Cambridge and its antecedent communities. A native of Cambridge, McLaughlin studied Canadian history at the University of Waterloo, Dalhousie University and finally the University of Toronto, where he completed a Ph.D. under Donald Creighton. McLaughlin has been connected with, for many years, the history department at St. Jerome’s College of the University of Waterloo, where he arrived in 1970. Focused academically on Canadian political history, he has also studied local history extensively, writing or contributing to books on Cambridge, Kitchener, Waterloo, Hespeler and the University of Waterloo.⁹

McLaughlin’s book on Cambridge represents a key contribution to the historiography of Galt. In his description of Galt’s history, he has drawn together an impressive amount of research from both archival material and secondary sources. He has, moreover, provided a great service in setting Galt’s early history beside contemporary events in Preston, Hespeler and the German-speaking rural areas of Waterloo County, on the one hand, while providing a post-amalgamation-Cambridge perspective, on the other. This vantage point is very helpful to the readers, who are given a sense of the gritty continuity

⁷ Ibid. 5.

⁸ Kenneth McLaughlin, *Cambridge: The Making of a Canadian City*, (Burlington, ON: Windsor Publications, 1987).

⁹ “The Friends of the Library present the 15th annual Celebration of UW Authors and the Creative Process,” <http://www.lib.uwaterloo.ca/develop/mclaughlin.html>, accessed 21 September 2009.

which connects the events and personalities of the pioneer era with their own, everyday, lives.

McLaughlin writes in a clear, readable style and has created added interest through the extensive use of colourful illustrations, including maps, photographs and art work.

Cambridge: The Making of a Canadian City is organized chronologically, with each chapter focusing on a distinct era, such as pre-European settlement, industrialization or post-amalgamation. Given the volume and density of information that is narrated chronologically, the reader sometimes finds it challenging to hold the thread of continuity that runs throughout the book. At times, for example, we might think the author is arguing that environmental forces have been key to the development of the community when he writes, “the lands bordering on the Grand River were destined to play a unique role in the history of Ontario.”¹⁰ At other times, we might think rather that “great men”, like Jacob Hespeler, were the primary engine driving Cambridge’s evolution.¹¹ Ultimately, McLaughlin seems to argue not for a pushing influence in the city’s history but a pulling one: the goal of an amalgamated municipality. The ever-increasing proximity of the three rapidly growing communities—Galt, Preston and Hespeler—he argues, their cultural similarities as well as shared infrastructure pressures all led to the near inevitability of amalgamation.

While McLaughlin hesitates to offer an explicit philosophy of history, he is, like Young and Taylor, clear about his hopes for the future of the community and the significance of history for that future. “My strongly held belief,” he writes, “[is] that without a sense of the past Canadians will be unable to discover their future.”¹² McLaughlin is obviously fond of Cambridge. Its continued “success” as a community, he argues, stems largely from a historical consciousness that is due to the “good sense” of

¹⁰ McLaughlin, *Cambridge*, 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 31.

¹² *Ibid.* 6

the city council, to a civic organization called Heritage Cambridge and, of course, to some good luck. Thanks to the living history provided every day by the city's historic architecture as well as the Grand and Speed Rivers, "Cambridge," we read, "is a city where the past is still present and where the future will be built with assurance."¹³

Jim Quantrell

Jim Quantrell (1948-) has not written a monograph on the history of Galt or Cambridge. Yet, his contribution to the city's historiography is significant and his perspective needs to be taken seriously. Raised in Galt, Quantrell was first attracted to the study of history in the classroom of Anne Wiebe at Glenview Park Secondary School. After high school, he earned both a B.A. and a M.A. in history from the University of Waterloo. After working, for several years, in the business world as a writer of technical manuals, Quantrell became the City of Cambridge Archivist in 1985.¹⁴

Not particularly interested in local history until he began his career as a municipal archivist, Quantrell dove into his research on Cambridge, and its antecedent communities, to become better prepared for his daily work and to gain a deeper understanding of his civic context. In an effort to take the rich holdings of the city archives to the public, Quantrell has engaged in an extensive program of research, writing and publishing. Among his thorough and helpful works are *Cambridge Mosaic*, *Time Frames* and *A Part of Our Past*—a collection of historical essays.¹⁵ Given his prolific contribution to our understanding of Cambridge's history, in general, and Galt, in particular, Quantrell needs to be

¹³ Ibid. 128.

¹⁴ Personal Interview with Jim Quantrell, 13 July 2009.

¹⁵ *Cambridge Mosaic*, Op. Cit., *Time Frames: Historical Chronologies of Galt, Preston, Hespeler, Blair and Cambridge*, (Cambridge ON: City of Cambridge Archives, 2003), and *A Part of Our Past: Essays on the History of Cambridge*, (Cambridge, ON: City of Cambridge Archives, 2000).

considered among Galt's greatest historians. For the purposes of this study, we will look briefly at his essay, "A Short History of Galt," which was written for inclusion in *A Part of Our Past: Essays on Cambridge's History*.¹⁶

"A Short History of Galt" has much to commend it. It is brief, at twelve pages, and provides a historical sketch that can be digested in one sitting. Yet, at the same time, it is written with great care and detail, offering an impressive volume of information. The challenge of summarizing the story of Galt in a single essay is a daunting one. An impressive aspect of Quantrell's work, however, is his winsome use of both significant events and amusing anecdotes to advance the narrative. Another commendable aspect of the essay is the author's balanced presentation of social, political and economic influences on the evolution of Galt.

Like McLaughlin, Quantrell is writing in the post-amalgamation Cambridge era and is able to offer a mature perspective on Galt's history. Also like McLaughlin, Quantrell looks at the amalgamation of Galt, Preston and Hespeler with a sense of inevitability. Of them, he writes, "Although the old rivalries and animosities remained in place, it was clear for all who wanted to look that the futures of the three municipalities were tied together." Yet, Quantrell is also to be commended for recognizing the community distinctions which continue to exist within Cambridge. He writes, insightfully, "While Galt no longer appears on Ontario's maps, it continues to live in the minds of its people."¹⁷

As a municipal employee, Quantrell is conscious of not putting an ideological slant on his history writing. Yet he does, in my view, offer an argument that is made, either implicitly or explicitly, by each of the other historians studied here, namely, that Galt (and/or Cambridge and/or North Dumfries) is a good

¹⁶ Jim Quantrell, "A Short History of Galt," *A Part of our Past: Essays on Cambridge's History*, 1-12.

¹⁷ Ibid. 12.

place to live and work and that it can continue to be a good place to live and work if residents remember what got their community to its place as “a dominant economic force in the region.”¹⁸

Conclusions

Students of Galt’s history are very fortunate to have at their disposal several excellent historical works, including and especially those reviewed in this paper. Young, Taylor, McLaughlin and Quantrell have each brought a unique set of experiences and skills to their history writing—among the group are amateur and professional historians in both municipal and private sector employment, with life experiences spread widely across time and space in the community’s history. Each has written in a way that reflects his own background and purposes. Each has written with a different style and offered a presentation with a different structure. All are to be honoured for the contribution of their histories to the people of the community—past, present and future.

Despite the significant differences among these four historians and their work, I contend that it is our recognition of the similarities among them that can help us to read their work more intelligently and to understand the discipline of historical study more deeply. Underlying almost every page of Galt’s history books is an assumption that the city is a good place to live and work. For each of its historians then, there is a sense that they grasp the key elements of Galt’s successes and a desire that the virtues of former generations would continue to be passed down through the ages. For Young, it is “industry and thrift” which have been Galt’s foundation and for Taylor it has been good local government, while for McLaughlin and Quantrell it has been a more nuanced combination of influences which might be grouped under the heading, “historical consciousness.” None of them have written simply because the past is interesting, although it certainly is so for them. All have written, rather, primarily because they

¹⁸ Ibid. 12

see something in the community's past which needs to be carried forward into the future. Though they do not all state this explicitly, it seems clear that their work cannot be understood properly without this purpose in mind.

If I could give any advice to the historians of Galt, studied here, it would be to state their fundamental purposes for writing history, either as I have identified them or differently, more clearly, explicitly and fully. If I could give any advice to those reading this paper, on the other hand, it is to read all kinds of history, including local history, seriously and critically, asking questions like, "what is this author really saying? And why?" Even more, perhaps, I offer my encouragement to other writers of history, no matter what their context or purpose, to ask these questions of themselves, to form clear answers and to state them explicitly in their work. The creation and sustenance of historical consciousness is a true virtue and social good, but only if it is accompanied by, and leads to, both clear thinking and honesty. If we can foster these virtues in our work as historians, then we will have done a real service to those around us, whatever our social context.