

## Liberal-Whig History

What has been termed ‘Whig History’ is a Liberal historiography that views history teleologically in terms of the progress of humanity towards enlightenment, rationalism, scientism, secularism, and the freedom of the individual. As attested by Herbert Butterfield (*The Whig Interpretation of History*, 1931) Whig history is characterized by presentism, a distinct historical methodology, and a strong historical bias.

Whig histories are present-oriented in studying the past from the concerns of the present, in viewing the march of history as demonstrating the principles of ‘progress’ in the growth of freedom of the individual and the establishment of constitutional government based on the concept of popular sovereignty. For Whig historians, history serves as an arbitrator for the making of ‘moral judgements’ on past events and personages. However, the ‘moral judgements’ are based on liberal political principles, rather than on God’s moral law. In Whig histories, there is no concept of studying history for its own sake; there is little historical understanding; and there is a complete lack of ‘an imaginative sympathy for the past’.

In their historical methodology, Whig historians are highly selective, highly biased, and given to making self-evident judgement on political issues. They focus on a single line of causation and on identifying ‘the agency’ responsible for the origin of the successful struggle to attain modern liberty and a government responsible to the people. (In Britain, the purported agency of progress in Whig histories was generally either the Protestant Reformation, or the recovery of knowledge of the ancient Anglo-Saxon liberties suppressed by the Normans.) Whatever is viewed as not being germane to the attainment of the freedom of the individual, and a liberal-democratic government in the present, is excluded from the history story.

Whig histories focus on ‘the great men of history’ and ‘the great watershed events’, and divide the leading historical personages of each era into progressives (democratic radicals, Protestant sectarians, and Lockean-liberals) and reactionaries (Anglican Tories and Roman Catholics) on the basis of their respective principles and actions in supporting or hindering the ultimate triumph of Lockean-liberal principles and democratic values. Prominent Tories, who were judged to have obstructed the attainment of the freedom of the individual and the establishment of a liberal-democratic popular government, are denigrated, disparaged, and denounced. They are treated in passing as objects of opprobrium for supposedly having impeded the progress of the nation, but otherwise are excluded from the historical narrative.

In Canadian historiography, the Liberal-Whig history template of interpretation became firmly established during the 1880s following the publication of the popular history works of a highly partisan Liberal journalist, John Charles Dent (1841-1888). In two major historical publications – *The Last Forty Years: Canada since the Union of 1841*, 2 vols. (Toronto: George Virtue, 1881), and *The Story of the Upper Canadian Rebellion: largely derived from original sources and documents*, 2 vols. (Toronto: C. Blakett Robinson, 1885), Dent applied the Liberal-Whig history template to the political history of the United Province of Canada, and subsequently sought the origins of the demand for ‘responsible government’ in the earlier political history of the Province of Upper Canada.

For Dent, the great historical theme was the attainment of self-government in local affairs through the achievement of ‘responsible government’; the agency was the Reform Party (the forerunner of the Liberal Party); the watershed event was the Rebellion of 1837; and the heroic personages were Lord Durham and Robert Baldwin.

The Rebellion of December 1837 is depicted by Dent as fully justified in having been undertaken by a people desiring freedom from the suffering of a long train of abuses under “the tyranny and oppression” of a Tory oligarchy in an outdated colonial system; and the defeat of ‘the insurgents’ is ascribed to a failure of leadership, principally in the erratic behavior and indecision of William Lyon Mackenzie. Yet, the Rebellion is held to have been a success in that it awakened the English people to “the reality of Canadian grievances”, made the British government aware of the need for the introduction of “a broad and liberal policy” of reform, and resulted in the appointment of Lord Durham. In that purview, the Rebellion was “an ordeal” that Upper Canadians were compelled to pass through on the way to the achievement of their liberty.

Lord Durham is hailed by Dent as “a Liberal of Liberals”, and a champion of “the cause of liberty and the rights of the common people” who, in ‘a Masterly State document’, the Durham Report (March 1839), recommended the constitutional changes that the Reform Party had been advocating for years – inclusive of ‘the great principle of responsible government’ – to address long-standing grievances.

As the story unfolds, it is Robert Baldwin who is held up for admiration for his commitment to the principle of responsible government in the struggle against a recalcitrant British government, and who is credited with achieving self-government for Canadians in local affairs. Baldwin is portrayed as “a man with political ideas in advance of his time and surroundings”, and as a man with a high sense of duty and of untarnished integrity, ‘whom Canadians held in great esteem, respect and veneration’.

In the Liberal-Whig history interpretation of John Charles Dent, there is a thinly-veiled regret that ‘the insurgents’ were unsuccessful in their attempt to overthrow the Anglican Tory establishment and to establish a liberal-democratic Reform government. Dent muses about the positive reception such a government would have received from ‘the people’, and about an expected acquiescence on the part of the British government for the establishment of a popular form of government. His writings convey an undercurrent of regret at a mission left incomplete in the failure to attain a complete self-government for Canadians in an independent republic.

The Liberal-Whig progressive interpretation of history dominated Canadian historiography well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in being written from a number of evolving ‘present-day perspectives’: constitutional history, rise of self-government, progressive history, and colony to nation history, etc. As late as the mid-century, a prominent Liberal historian disparaged the Anglican Tories and dismissed them as irrelevant in the progress of the Province of Upper Canada and to Canadian history more generally. He wrote:

“What, after all, of Bishop Strachan and the young Tories he schooled, what else of Strachan the politician can one say than that it is the most difficult thing in the world to imagine there ever was such a man. Politically, he believed (as Walter Bagot said of Lord Elton) in everything it is impossible to believe in.” (William Kilbourn, *The Firebrand, William Lyon Mackenzie and the Rebellion in Upper Canada*, 1956, Introduction.)

Underlying the Liberal-Whig interpretation of Canadian history is a conceit on the part of Liberals that they were, and are, the true representatives of ‘the people’, and a belief that, historically, it was the Reformers who alone were defenders of ‘the rights of the people’ in what is viewed as an epic struggle for individual freedom and popular government against supposedly authoritarian royal governors (royal absolutism) and reactionary Tories. Since the Anglican Tories of Upper Canada were not in accord with the partisan liberal-Whig concept of ‘progress’ – which embraces the triumph of rationalism, individualism, secularism, and popular sovereignty – the Tories have been simply dismissed from the historical record and characterized in passing as intolerant reactionaries who were supposedly self-serving and corrupt.

Since the mid-1960s, Canadian history has undergone a transformation. History has become decentralized with a focus on the writing of regional and provincial histories, social and labour histories, ethnic and women's histories, indigenous peoples' history, military histories focused on the two world wars, and more recently, environmental history. The old political history narrative of national development within a Liberal-Whig framework of interpretation has been almost totally abandoned.

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