



Baldwin's intervention in Canadian history was momentous, and in this account history is intertwined with Baldwin's enigmatic private life. Michael S. Cross spent years researching this complex and exceptional man. He speaks to us about how Robert Baldwin has impacted Canadian politics and Canadian way of life.

A Biography of
Robert Baldwin: The
Morning-Star
of Memory
By Michael S. Cross

"An extraordinary biography."
--Maclean's

*"This is an essential biography,
as much of the heart as it is of
politics."* --John Ralston Saul,
author of *Louis-Hippolyte
LaFontaine and Robert
Baldwin*

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9780195449549
452 pages | 6 x 9"
\$39.95

OUP: What impact has Robert Baldwin had on Canadian history and politics?

MC: Baldwin was the chief advocate for the modern system of Canadian government, responsible government, in which the executive or cabinet must maintain the support of the people's elected representatives in the Commons. Others joined him in the cause but he had the clearest vision that responsible government had several requirements. While

some of the principles have frayed over time as prime ministers have seized more power. Baldwin would recognize today's Canadian government as his creation.

He recognized that if Canada was to be a nation within the British empire it needed both strong institutions and people capable of operating and maintaining those institutions. That is why he established the University of Toronto as a place to create an educated social and

political leadership. It is also why he set up the form of local government that still, in large measure, prevails in Ontario and other provinces.

Baldwin despised the old violent politics of the colonial era where elections were often decided by riots and even murder. He tried to legislate against partisan violence and to set an example of a new sort of reasoned political practice.

One of Baldwin's greatest contributions was

his realization that, after English Upper Canada and French Lower Canada were joined in one colony in 1841, the only possible future was a bicultural one. English and French had to work together or the new polity was doomed. Baldwin created a bicultural Reform Party and based it on respect for French Canadian needs and sensitivities.

OUP: In the preface, you mention that the decades involved in “the birthing of this account makes elephant gestation appear mercurial.” Discuss your experience writing *A Biography of Robert Baldwin*.

MC: The idea for the book grew out of a request by the Dictionary of Canadian Biography to write the sketch of Baldwin for Volume 8 of that series. Robert Fraser, my former Ph.D. student and an editor at the DCB, worked with me on the project.

I did a lot of research in Ottawa and Toronto and Fraser worked in Toronto. Fraser then had to stop for personal reasons. That required a full rethink since we had intended each to write a section and then integrate them. The thought of managing it alone was daunting. It was easier to pick it up occasionally while focusing on the immediate issues of teaching, administration and family.

I took early retirement in 2002 and still devoted only partial attention to the book. It was about half written when John Ralston Saul approached me for information for the short biography he was writing about Baldwin and his

political partner, Louis LaFontaine. Talking to John got the juices flowing and the book was finished fairly quickly.

OUP: What reaction did you have to John Ralston Saul’s comment, which was written in his *Extraordinary Canadians* book, regarding his anticipation for your biography on Robert Baldwin?

MC: It was rather embarrassing to see John’s admonition to finish the book spelled out in giant letters in his own volume. Yet, it also increased my sense that this was something that really did need doing.

OUP: How does your book differ from other accounts of Robert Baldwin’s life?

MC: There has not been a full length biography of Baldwin since 1933 and that study by George Wilson was a bloodless political account. Other short works have been done by Stephen Leacock, J.M.S. Careless and, of course, John Ralston Saul. There is a good family account by R.M. and J. Baldwin from 1969 that was the first to capture something of the man. However, Robert Baldwin is only part of their story in a fairly short book. Theirs was, inevitably, a family homage to Robert and his father rather than a true critical analysis. In my book, the full, complicated man—reformer and conservative, passionate husband and cold public personality, accomplished leader and reluctant leader emerges for the first time.

OUP: Discuss the subtitle of this work.

MC: The more I knew Baldwin the more I realized that “memory” was central in understanding him. In many respects he was rarely comfortable in the present and the demands it placed on him. He lived in the future when his responsible government would guide Canada to its rightful place. More so, he lived in the past with the memory of his beloved wife, Eliza. With her died the life he hoped to live, one of love, and happiness, not tormented by responsibility. In politics he was driven by memory, too, of his family’s struggles to find a solution to the problems of their Irish heritage and the memory of the burden his father laid upon him to advance liberal principles and carry on the family’s place in public life. Memory becomes central to understanding Robert Baldwin.

OUP: Why are some sections of *A Biography of Robert Baldwin* written in a non-linear fashion as opposed to the standard chronology of biographies?

MC: This was a story that could have been told in linear fashion as most biographies are. However, such an approach would not have captured the intimate and intricate interplay of past and present that was Baldwin’s mind and life. It would not have emphasized the role of memory. And, it would not have made clear how his past explained his creative political years between 1841 and 1851. Nor would a linear approach have been as much fun to write.

OUP: How does Robert Baldwin's character compare to fellow political personalities at the time?

MC: Robert lived, in the 1840s and 1850s through a time of great political and social change. The Rebellions from 1837 to 1838 had altered the political landscape. Britain's decision to break up the old trading empire during the 1840s forced Canadians to confront a new economic and political reality. There was an inevitable transition in political personalities. The old gentry of the so-called "Family Compact" and similar groups gave way to middle class men. Accumulation of land was replaced by business interests in railways, mining and the like. In Upper Canada, the Anglican leader, Bishop Strachan, had been at the centre of politics and society. By the 1850s more down to earth, acquisitive men such as John A. Macdonald and Francis Hincks were the leaders.

Robert was the transitional figure. He was, by birth, a member of the landed gentry and held many of its core values. He believed deeply in the duty of the elite to serve society. He opposed debt and favouritism to business interests; yet, his reforms allowed business-minded men to rise to power. His reforms created a popular politics more suited for a hail-fellow like John A. Macdonald than a reserved patrician like Robert Baldwin.

OUP: How did Robert Baldwin's personality in private life differ from his public persona?

MC: Baldwin was anything but a charismatic public figure. Most

people thought him cold, difficult to approach, and often rigid in his positions. He led because he had ideas; he was respected for his integrity and honesty, not because he was loved. He would have had a short and ignominious career in our modern media-focused politics.

The private man, at least during his marriage, was very different. Far from rigid, he was uncertain of his abilities and whether he had a role in politics. He loved solitude and was happy to limit himself to his family. Had duty, instilled in him by his father, not been so overpowering an influence he would have readily practiced law, administered the law, and loved his wife, avoiding the public sphere.

OUP: What kind of relationship did Robert Baldwin have with his wife, Eliza?

MC: Outsiders would have been astonished to see the private Baldwin, Baldwin the husband. With Eliza he was easy, playful, loving. She was his everything.

They were cousins, and she was a girl of 16 when they fell in love. The family tried to stifle the romance, sending Eliza off to relatives in New York to keep her from Robert. To no avail. The love only deepened, as Robert's romanticism was stimulated all the more by these obstacles.

They were permitted to marry in 1827 and the marriage was everything he hoped for. They were lovers, friends, and companions. It was too brief. Eliza had difficulties

in the delivery of their fourth child and had to undergo surgery. She never regained her health and died early in 1836.

Robert was devastated and never fully recovered from the loss. Eliza's memory, her letters to him, and her room that he maintained unchanged, were the core artifacts of his existence for the last twenty-two years of his life.

OUP: What was the most surprising or unexpected piece of information that you learned while working on this book?

MC: Certainly the depth of Robert's obsession with his dead wife was a surprise. He turned her memory into a personal cult and allowed it both to warm him and to plunge him into depression. The unearthing of a document that confirmed the strange operation on his body, a month after his death, was a revelation. Overall, the discovery of the great gulf between the private man of ancient loves and sorrows and the austere public figure that both contemporaries and historians thought they knew was the most unexpected. ■

This interview has been condensed and edited.