

# Beverley Baxter in Empireland

*A Canadian columnist beat the British drum, at Lord Beaverbrook's behest.*

RAMSAY COOK

**Canada and the End of the Imperial Dream: Beverley Baxter's Reports from London through War and Peace, 1936–1960**

*Neville Thompson*

Oxford University Press

394 pages, hardcover

ISBN 9780199003938

**T**HE BRITISH EMPIRE/Commonwealth, earlier a staple of Canadian historical writing, has fallen out of fashion. That partly reflects the adjournment *sine die* of the once acrimonious debates about Canada's place in an empire on which the sun was said never to set. Neville Thompson's new book is both an attempt to revive a neglected historical subject

and an account of one man's effort to prevent the sunset. In those historical and political debates, one side was often called "imperialist," the other "nationalist" even though the reality was far more complex. As Carl Berger argued in a superb book entitled *The Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism 1867–1914*, "Canadian imperialism was one version of Canadian nationalism ... which rested upon a certain understanding of history, the national character, and the national mission." That could be called British-Canadian nationalism. Most French Canadians, and many other Canadians, thought of themselves as nationalists in a North American nation.

After Confederation these two nationalist schools shared a common view: dissatisfaction with Canada's status, a status where Britain formulated foreign policy for the entire empire. British-Canadian nationalists, mostly Conservatives, favoured some institution that would allow the Dominions a voice in making imperial foreign policy: imperial federation or an imperial cabinet that would continuously consult before deciding. Canadian nationalists argued instead that Canada should acquire the power to make its own external policy by exercising complete autonomy in domestic and foreign policy.

Although imperial federation was never

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anything more than a vague idea, the imperial cabinet concept was tested during World War One, experiencing some modest success (even though Sir Robert Borden complained privately that the British treated the Dominions as "mere toy automata"). After the war that ad hoc arrangement soon proved unworkable. The Dominions insisted on signing the Treaty of Versailles separately (although indented under Great Britain), and on obtaining seats in the League of Nations. While the "splendid little war" was a cause for pride, Canadians knew that the glory of Vimy was followed by the gore of Passchendaele. Then there was the political cost paid in the deep divisions created by conscription, a policy introduced by the Union government not only for military reasons but also to shore up Borden's quest for an improved Canadian status in the empire. These grim realities made Canadians—not just francophones—wary of overseas commitments whether with "imperial" partners or the new League of Nations.

In 1921 Prime Minister Arthur Meighen found himself at odds with the other members of the Imperial Cabinet over the renewal of the Anglo-Japanese Treaty. Then, in 1922, British prime minister David Lloyd George called for military support from the Dominions for war with Turkey at Chanak without any prior consultation. Canada declined. The *coup de grâce* came at the 1923 Imperial Conference, when William Lyon Mackenzie King insisted that its final communiqué

note that all decisions were subject to the approval of each Dominion parliament. The 1926 Balfour Declaration iced the autonomy cake, the Statute of Westminster legalized it. "We are all 'extreme autonomists' now," the *Manitoba Free Press* crowed when the Bennett Conservatives approved it. For the Dominions the Empire was now over, replaced by a commonwealth of equal, autonomous countries. Only a few details remained: a separate declaration of war in 1939, Canadian citizenship in 1947, a flag in 1965 and power to amend the *British North America Act* in 1982. The final act beckons: replacement of the British monarchy by the governor general as the only head of state in Canada.

The lack of this background narrative perhaps explains this book's somewhat misleading title, *Canada and the End of the Imperial Dream*. A more accurate one would be: "Beverley Baxter's Attempt to Revive an Old 19th-Century Imperial Dream in Canada and Great Britain through his regular columns in *Macleans* Magazine between 1936 and 1960."

Born in Toronto, Baxter dropped out of Harbord Collegiate at 15 to become a piano salesman, eventually earning \$3,500 a year. (This is the first and last detail about his income. He later became a wealthy man, exactly how and how affluent we are not told, although he apparently faced money problems after he finally broke with his patron, Lord Beaverbrook). In 1915 he joined the Canadian Army as a commissioned officer (obtained through a relative's influence) in the Signal Corps. Once overseas he caught the influenza and was hospitalized in England. After the war he settled in England, making trips to Canada and the United States for speaking engagements or vacations. In London he was mainly employed as a journalist with Beaverbrook's *Daily Express* and *The Evening Standard* and in the film industry. Moreover, he sat as a Conservative member of the British Parliament from 1935 until his death in 1964.

Baxter's journalism was probably the central focus of Neville Thompson's Joanne Goodman Lectures at the University of Western Ontario in 2004. Now the author has expanded his three-part series into a 360-page monograph by incorporating

copious details about British political and parliamentary history roughly from appeasement through World War Two to the Cold War, Suez and decolonization, from Chamberlain to Macmillan. Cabinet quarrels, domestic politics and policies are detailed in a conscientiously prepared synthesis of standard secondary works. The politics of Canada and, to a lesser degree, of the United States are occasionally, but thankfully more briefly, interwoven. Although some of this is helpful background to Baxter's journalism, the central figure often disappears behind a distracting blizzard of sometimes irrelevant detail. A fuller biography of Beverley Baxter and a sharper editorial pencil would have increased the interest of this lengthy book.

A second problem is this: both "imperial" and "imperialism" are malleable terms that, without some explanation, make more sound than sense. Thompson writes about Baxter as an "imperial citizen," clearly implying that he was something more than simply a "British subject." He calls Toronto "the heartland of Canadian imperialism," but does that mean the same as British imperialism? He describes a "social-imperial grenade" that advocated no restraint on profits and earnings and a weekly basic wage of six pounds for workers. Other examples abound. The "imperial dream" sometimes encompasses all these versions, but since its essential content was some form of institutionally united empire with a single foreign, defence and sometimes trade policy, it is far from clear that the dream was shared by imperialists of all stripes. British politicians, including Churchill, could speak as though "empire" and "Commonwealth" were interchangeable terms, although most Canadians had come to believe that they no longer lived in a colony, which is, after all, what empires possess. That most Canadians valued the British connection for its institutions and culture, and as a counterbalance to the United States, cannot be denied. But was that imperialism? Hardly. The empire that splashed red across Asia, Africa and the Middle East was rarely on the Canadian radar except to signal danger: the Boer War, the Great War, Chanak, Suez. These were the times when the "weary Titan," struggling "under the too vast orb of its fate," called them to her councils.

There is another word that is associated with the imperial dream: "race." Baxter spoke of the "Canadian race" (Thompson speaks of "interracial relations"), but the word was usually qualified as in "the mighty destiny of the British race" that was often claimed to be the basis of the empire's real or anticipated unity. What does this term mean? Was it thought to have a biological basis (which it does not), or did it mean culture or ethnicity? Certainly no imperialist believed that the British were a mere ethnic group. "Imperialism" and "race" are slippery terms. Lewis Carroll's Alice asked "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things." Humpty Dumpty, an imperialist after Beverley Baxter's and Max Aitken's hearts, replied: "The question is which is to be master—that's all." Empire means that one group or state has dominant power over other peoples and territories known as colonies; imperialism is the ideology that attempts to justify that domination. The idea of race, whether biological or ethnocentric, often infuses that ideology.

Now to what is original in Thompson's book: the exploration of Baxter's columns. Who was Baxter,

what was his dream, and why did *Maclean's* hire him? Thompson notes that he regularly played the role of Beaverbrook's gramophone, faithfully translating his master's voice into purple prose, promoting him as "his hero," "a Napoleon" having "some claim to the higher attributes of Christianity" and "whose mind is both penetrating and informed." Readers are left wondering what Beaverbrook paid him to believe and say such things and for his editorial and journalistic services.

The two had their differences, usually resolved amicably. They shared a faith declared by Baxter in his column of August 1, 1942: "*The British Empire will be needed as the cornerstone of the New World. Will a truly united Canada play her part in the leadership that alone can guide mankind from the darkness to the light?*" This messianic exhortation coloured all of Baxter's communiqués from the centre of civilization.

## The desperate British wartime crisis required just enough drama to stimulate rather than depress Canadian readers who were being called upon to increase their war effort.

In his regular "Letter," Baxter skillfully, if not always truthfully, performed a deft balancing act: the desperate British wartime crisis required just enough drama to stimulate rather than depress Canadian readers who were being called upon to increase their war effort. He repeatedly praised Canadian troops, hoping they would soon move from camps in Britain to the real war on the continent. He believed what he wrote *ex cathedra* in the *Daily Telegraph* just prior to the outbreak of war: "If Great Britain goes to war for any cause, just or unjust, wise or foolish, no living premier or ex-premier of Canada or Great Britain could prevent the young men of Canada streaming in their tens of thousands to the assistance of the Mother Country." Later not even the Dieppe disaster dampened his enthusiasm for more front-line action for Canadians. Impatient for a second front he spared no praise when writing of the Soviet Union, once distrusted and after the war condemned. Inconsistency often seemed his stock-in-trade, a characteristic shared with, or acquired from, the "Beaver." Always capable of flattery in a good cause, following one of his speaking junkets to North America, he wrote that "perhaps here in Canada is the truest expression of what is best in British ideology and British tradition ... I felt that the day might come when in Britain we shall have to look to Canada for guidance in the way of life." Those inflated imaginings displayed in a nutshell the illusions inhabiting the "Imperial Dream" of Baxter, Beaverbrook and a few others.

In 1956, in a startling about-face and a move that would cause a permanent rift between him and Beaverbrook, Baxter gave up on the empire to become "a born-again convert" to European unification led, of course, by Great Britain, and possibly including the Dominions. Thompson explains that Baxter was converted by a "radical, raffish bisexual" fellow MP to the conclusion that post-war Britain was too weak to resume leadership of the "Empire." He now claimed that Britain had always been a "European ... power." Awakening from dreams usually means a return to reality, but surely something more led him onto the road to Europe?

In Thompson's often ironic and critical recounting, Baxter had no understanding that Canada, far from being a homogeneous race, rather contained two major cultural groups, anglophone and francophone, plus immigrants from many countries. Only twice does Baxter make reference to the French Canadians, whose weight in Canadian political life equalled or even exceeded their numbers. Once he chided them for their 90 percent negative vote in the 1942 conscription plebiscite. His other reference is to describe a French-Canadian soldier whom he met in England as "a wonderful ambassador. He has warmth and charm. He has good humor and is sentimental." If it is not a redundancy, that might be called condescending imperialism, usually reserved for the lesser breeds without the law. Baxter's imperialist dream evoked some enthusiasm in Toronto business and Conservative circles and even among some anglophone Quebecers, but it left French Canadians cold and suspicious. In Western Canada strong support for the war effort was accompanied by views of Commonwealth relations similar to those expressed in the Liberal nationalist Sifton papers. For these Canadians the war was about something more important than "the high destiny of the British

race." If the Great War was the Empire's War, World War Two became Canada's war conducted with its Commonwealth, European, American and USSR allies. These Canadians formed the majority who supported Mackenzie King (or the CCF) even when holding their noses.

So what influence did Baxter's unrelenting imperialist advocacy exert? That the "imperialist" Lieutenant Colonel J.B. Maclean kept him on suggests that he was popular enough. But apart from quoting the odd letter to the editor, Thompson makes no attempt to measure broader influence, not even offering any circulation figures. He often resorts to tentative phrases such as "readers must have felt," "may have helped," "undoubtedly read," "undoubtedly hoped," but without any concrete evidence. Many may have read and some may have chosen Baxter's message. But Canadians had more sources than *Maclean's* for information about Britain and the progress of the war: the CBC/Radio Canada—especially Matthew Halton—and the BBC news broadcasts, daily newspapers with overseas correspondents and foreign, mainly U.S., magazines. In contrast to ex-pats such as Baxter, Beaverbrook and Lord Bennett of Calgary, who had lost touch with Canada, these journalists had a firmer, more immediate grasp on Canadian realities during its war. Theirs were the dominant voices, Baxter's only an echo of a time that had passed.

Shortly after the Allied victory at El Alamein in 1942, Baxter, urged on by Floyd Chalmers, wrote a three-act play, *It Happened in September*, based on the life and death of a friend and fellow Conservative imperialist. The night it opened in London, the stalls were occupied by many nobles from the social class into which the young man from Toronto had climbed. When the curtain fell a woman rose in the balcony shouting: "It's a rotten play." The critics agreed. It soon closed, Baxter rejecting an offer by Garfield Weston to purchase 1,000 pounds' worth of tickets for Canadian troops. That same verdict might apply to Baxter's long-running Technicolor drama entitled "The Imperial Dream." LRC