

▣ **Blue Butterfly Books Author**

William Christian, Parkin, Canada's Most Famous Forgotten Man

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**The Forgotten Canadian and Why We Forgot Him
An Appreciation of William Christian's book on Sir George Parkin**

The recent “history wars” over the re-enactment of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham clearly demonstrate that what we remember, and what we choose to forget or banish from memory, are critically important to defining ourselves and our country. Most historical writing focuses on those people, events, ideas, social movements, economic conditions, cultural trends, and geographical factors that explain why we are the people and country of today. Put another way, we search for our “roots,” for those historical phenomena that underpin what it means now to be Canadian. This is not all a good news story of positive progress, of course, for we also explore past expressions of discrimination (racial, ethnic, linguistic) or exploitation (by gender, class, region) in order to understand better any lingering manifestations of these today, presumably the easier to expose and stamp them out. What we do not see as much is historical exploration of what we choose to forget, of what we have decided is not part of the Canadian story. Or, if it is a part, then it is only as a negative example in passing of what we left behind – and a good thing we did too.

William Christian's book, *Parkin: Canada's Most Famous Forgotten Man* ([Toronto: Blue Butterfly Books, 2008](#)) is a shining exception. Scholarly but highly readable, this very well designed and attractively illustrated volume is a fascinating exploration of the Canadian identity through the biography of one of its most articulate spokesmen, George Robert Parkin. He was enormously influential in his time – he was once called the best-known Canadian of his generation after Sir Wilfrid Laurier – and yet now is almost completely forgotten. This book rescues him by telling the story of a once-influential life, and the connected story of Canada itself passing from the colonial pioneering period of the early nineteenth century (Parkin's family came to rural New Brunswick as refugees of the depression following the Napoleonic Wars) to modernity with all its social and cultural complexity, including the current Leader of the Opposition in Ottawa, Michael Ignatieff, as a family descendant.

Parkin was a noted educator; he was the second founder of Upper Canada College in the 1890s when it was on the verge of collapse, first and long-time organizer after 1903 of the Rhodes Scholarships, and a very influential New Brunswick teacher and inspirer there of such poets as Bliss Carman and Charles GD Roberts. Parkin was a deep but very broad Christian who struggled to find one's proper moral position and appropriate public duty in an increasingly secular and hedonistic world. He was an imperial-nationalist (who travelled, spoke, wrote, and influenced all across Canada and throughout the British Empire from the 1880s to 1920s) trying to conceptualize Canada's place therein as a new Dominion, no longer a colony, not yet an independent

nation, seeking a role for his country that carried dignity and purpose on the world stage as it then was. He was an internationalist when most still thought in terms of locality. While Parkin was no original thinker or philosopher; very much like a Pierre Berton, he encapsulated the predominant ideas and assumptions of his age, from idealism to imperialism, and then popularized them in thousands of lectures, hundreds of written works, and endless personal connections. Parkin was very influential, a confidante of prime ministers and governors general, of leading writers and editors, of university presidents (who were much more public figures then compared to today) and railway magnates, of British lords and Anglican archbishops. He gave the program and ideal of a more closely unified British Empire, with Canada playing a lead role, perhaps in time the lead role, a great deal of credibility and popularity than it otherwise would have had. While this is an idea now long tossed aside by history, it was starkly manifested in reality in France in 1914-18, in the Canadian Boer War contingents, and in many smaller ways, from common imperial postage to all-red-route telecommunications, from educational scholarships to school texts and maps, from missionary work to Empire Day, in all of which Parkin had a hand. He directly influenced the imperial ideas of Alfred Milner, Winston Churchill, Henry Asquith, Lord Rosebery, and countless others.

Finally, Parkin belonged to a fascinating family. From that obscure backwoods New Brunswick farm, his daughters married future arts patron, ambassador, and governor general Vincent Massey; educator, historian, and author W.L. Grant, financier and cabinet minister J.M. Macdonnell; and co-inventor of air-borne radar Harry Wimperis. A grandchild includes George Parkin Grant, whose *Lament for a Nation* explicitly deplores the passing of his grandfather's ideals. A great-grandson, Michael Ignatieff, shares his great-grandfather's internationalism and global perspectives, and perfectly represents his great-grandfather's ideal of the well-educated philosopher king serving as public leaders in modern democracies.

Christian's book is very much a biography in the classic sense. This is no dry academic text (although it is well researched and footnoted), but the story of a life actually lived, Parkin's public and private lives intertwined rather than using him merely as a convenient peg on which to hang some theoretical discourse. The intriguing story of Parkin's relationship with his wife, Annie, a former high-school student 12 years his junior, receives sensitive exploration, with the anatomy of a Victorian marriage exposed. The social settings in which the story unfolds – public and private, from Loyalist Fredericton to booming London – are well depicted by the author.

And so why has such an influential man, one much admired by contemporaries, been forgotten? The possible answers reveal much about our national character and our history, for Parkin's significance in 2009 rests as much with our forgetting him as with remembering his many concrete accomplishments. Are we embarrassed in our multicultural present by the "inconvenient truth" of our imperial and anglophile past and its continuing influence that Parkin so embodied? Do we indeed like to deny our (yes, our) imperial past that we Canadians enthusiastically embraced in the favour of the national myth that we were an exploited colony that rose to throw off the chains of the Colonial Office in London? Is talk of building personal "character" as a central goal of education too problematic in a pluralistic and pragmatic world, as Parkin practised – and the absence of which we often publicly regret today? Is duty and service in public life too threatening, for Parkin continually asked long before Kennedy what one could –

and should – do for one’s country? That is a sentiment that most agree with, in the abstract of course, and then we deny by our minimal participation in public affairs even as we demand lower taxes and cuts to all programs that don’t affect us personally! Does the concept of ethical internationalism and global obligations on the world stage threaten our comfort zone, for Parkin struggled to discern these ideals over his entire life? And does his sustained critique of the small-scale pragmatic practicality (as opposed to larger ideals) of modern life, its individualism and pursuit of pleasure, disturb our easy lives, even as we lament the lack of vision in our leaders in tackling the big issues such as health care, poverty, immigration, Aboriginal governance, or the economy? Do we feel better denying, unlike Parkin and his grandson, the very possibility of Canada as an independent and ethical entity in the world in the face of American continental integration and technological homogeneity? Do we, therefore, deny/forget those who in these ways make us uncomfortable? Why do we lament our lack of awareness about our history, yet we choose to ignore so many facets of it, so many triumphs of the human will and spirit in the past, unless these conform to some sort of modern ideal?

Parkin was a grand visionary within the context of his times, at once an idealist and pragmatist who could both dream big and accomplish much, and he very much believed in the possibility of Canada. We would do well to remember better our “most famous forgotten man.”