



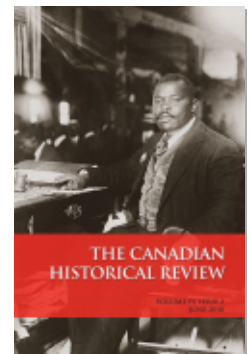
Exiles from Nowhere: The Jews and the Canadian Elite , and:
True Patriot Love: Four Generations In Search of Canada
(review)

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Reviews



Exiles from Nowhere: The Jews and the Canadian Elite. ALAN MENDELSON. Montreal: Robin Brass Studio, 2008. Pp. 432, \$29.95

True Patriot Love: Four Generations In Search of Canada. MICHAEL IGNATIEFF. Toronto: Viking, 2009. Pp. 224, \$30.00

It is impossible to read these books without indulging the adage that all history is personal. *Exiles from Nowhere* is a monograph about the 'genteel anti-Semitism' harboured from the 1880s to the 1980s by a socially incestuous circle of influential Canadian politicians and opinion leaders. Written by Alan Mendelson, a retired professor of religious studies, the book begins with an anecdote about his father, Israel, whose ambition to study engineering in Washington, DC, was frustrated by family fears of anti-Semitism. *True Patriot Love* is Michael Ignatieff's affectionate portrait of his mother's influential family, the Grants, whose 'vocation' was the 'work of nation building' (164). Trained as a social historian, Ignatieff is a gifted writer, public intellectual, and aspiring prime minister who sees himself as the inheritor of his family's calling.

What links these books are passion, a moral view of history, and a fascination with the intellectual genealogy of Canada's Anglo-Saxon elite, in particular George Parkin Grant, the philosopher and conservative Christian who was Ignatieff's uncle and, briefly, Mendelson's colleague. What differentiates the books, apart from genre, is emphasis, interpretation, and tone. Where Ignatieff sees tolerance in his family's history and proclaims the Canadian virtue of 'trying to understand each other across differences that have broken other countries apart' (17), Mendelson excoriates a national past shrouded in visceral hatred, social arrogance, and cultural ignorance, insisting that successive generations of journalists, politicians, and academics, not least the Grants, undermined society by 'teaching contempt for the Other' (320).

Less a book than an indictment, *Exiles from Nowhere* flays the reputations of celebrated Canadians from Goldwin Smith, 'perhaps the most vicious antisemite in the English-speaking world' (16) to the devious Mackenzie King, and the detestably imperious Vincent Massey. Mendelson makes quick work of George Monro Grant, the Presbyterian clergyman who argued in favour of Chinese immigration in the late nineteenth century and, as principal of Queen's, opened the University to Roman Catholics. But Grant, Mendelson insists, was also a proponent of Christian triumphalism hostile to Jews and Judaism. Ditto for his contemporary, George Parkin, headmaster of Upper Canada College (ucc), administrator of the Rhodes Trust, and ardent proponent of Nordic superiority.

Unfortunately, what consumes, distorts, and ultimately devalues Mendelson's book is his obsessive vendetta against these men's grandson, George Parkin Grant. In a massive lapse of editorial judgment, six of the book's ten chapters are devoted to bludgeoning Grant's reputation. The pummelling begins with Mendelson backhandedly praising Grant's 'finest hour' (178) when, as an Oxford Rhodes scholar in 1940, he overcame his 'pro-German sympathies' (170), renounced pacifism, and volunteered as a London fire warden, only to suffer a nervous breakdown during the Blitz. According to Mendelson, this psychological trauma turned out to be the least of Grant's infirmities, for over the course of his subsequent academic career he exhibited a chronic weakness for the writings of anti-Semitic intellectuals such as Toynbee, Heidegger, Céline and Simone Weil. Their strictures fanned Grant's exalted view of Christianity, fuelled odious caricatures of Judaism in his teaching and writing, and misshaped his relationships with Jewish intellectuals. While Mendelson's book adds to the growing historiography of Canadian anti-Semitism, its impact is diminished by the author's undisguised contempt, tiresome sarcasm, and too frequent tendency to overreach the evidence.

The contrast with *True Patriot Love* could hardly be greater and not simply because the whiff of anti-Semitism is undetectable in its pages. The words *love*, *dreams*, and *imagination* are frequently invoked and there is a self-consciously romantic tone to Ignatieff's book. He acknowledges 'how vain and distorted our family myth making could be' (23), but makes a virtue of these vices by attributing them to noble love of country. The George Monro Grant whom Ignatieff describes is the adventurer who crossed the continent with Sandford Fleming in 1872, and whose account of that astonishing voyage extolled the country's promise while offering a sympathetic view of the Indigenous peoples he encountered. Ignatieff's treatment of his grandfather,

William Lawson Grant, a militarist and francophile academic who taught briefly at Queen's, is equally reverential. Returning to Canada a wounded veteran of the First World War, he succeeded his father-in-law as principal of UCC, transforming it into 'a modern school for an industrial country' (110) and urging his students to embrace internationalism.

In keeping with family tradition his son, George Parkin Grant, attended both UCC and Queen's, but in contrast to the optimism of his forbears, engraved his place in Canadian culture with the 1965 doomsday polemic, *Lament for a Nation*. Although Ignatieff is generous about describing his uncle's intellect and personality, the man he portrays cuts a pitiful figure with his 'monstrous' (120) Oedipus complex and profound pessimism. More to the point, Grant's anti-liberalism is the perfect foil to his nephew's politics, the ideal platform from which Ignatieff can set out to 'fix what is so obviously wrong' (29) with Canada, while paying homage to the logic of a country different from the United States, to a place 'where government does still matter' (175), where 'public policy can actually improve people's lives' (176).

By hitching genealogy to autobiography Ignatieff oscillates between narrating the past and stumping a manifesto of political ambition. The result, quite literally, is a past in the service of the present. Curiously for someone who has spent much of his life as an expatriate, Ignatieff warns against the dangers of cosmopolitanism and rehabilitates the glory of patriotism as 'the single greatest asset of successful societies' (176). Having written thoughtfully on the catastrophic ethnic rivalries that beset the former Yugoslavia, Ignatieff is obviously sensitive to the complicated politics that can poison people's minds. And yet contested terms such as *state*, *nation*, or *nationalism* are all but banished from this book's vocabulary. Patriotism certainly simplifies things, removing semantic and conceptual impediments to Ignatieff's eloquent, aphoristic prose.

Without instinctively embracing Samuel's Johnson's quip about patriotism as the refuge of scoundrels, some readers will find Ignatieff's flag wrapping opportunistic or cringe at the politically correct suggestion that 'to understand Canada you have to walk a mile in the moccasins of others' (15). Caught up in the declarative beauty of his prose Ignatieff occasionally miscalculates its meaning. If, after all, his great-grandfather understood correctly that 'all national dreams, all acts of nation building, at least in Canada, are achieved at someone's expense' (59), then who will pay for Ignatieff's vision if and when the time comes?

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