

Historian Ramsay Cook helped define modern Canada

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We see Canada today through Ramsay Cook's eyes. More than any other historian of the last half of the 20th century, he defined Canada as we now live it, a definition forged in the place and time of his youth.

"All roads lead back to his childhood on the Prairies," maintains Donald Wright, biographer of the historian Donald Creighton, who is at work on a biography of Prof. Cook. "The Prairies were marked by pluralism, by difference. That's the world he knew. And when he went to write history, he couldn't write it from one perspective. It was impossible. It could only be written from multiple perspectives."

As Prof. Cook wrote in 1967: "Instead of constantly deploring our lack of national identity, we should attempt to understand and explain the regional, ethnic and class identities that we do have. It might be that it is in these limited identities that 'Canadianism' is found."

"He was a giant," his friend and fellow historian John English concludes. At a critical moment in the life of the nation, when Canada seemed on the brink of dissolution, Prof. Cook succeeded in explaining French Canada to the English and English Canada to the French, while insisting neither encompassed the multiethnic, multilinguistic and multiracial identities of the Canadian mosaic. That vision, shared by his friend Pierre Trudeau and others who rallied to rescue a splintering nation, won through.

Beyond that, he was a beloved husband, brother, father and grandfather, colleague and teacher. In the view of fellow historian and close friend Craig Brown, who first met Ramsay Cook when they were both students at University of Toronto in 1957, "he was just a great guy."

Prof. Cook died in Toronto on July 14, after a brief battle with pancreatic cancer.

George Ramsay Cook was born almost 84 years earlier, on Nov. 28, 1931, in the small Saskatchewan community of Alameda, the son of Russell Cook – who became a United Church minister after, as his son put it, the family farm more or less blew away – and his wife, Lillie Ellen (née Young). The boy grew up in various Saskatchewan and Manitoba towns as the family was transferred from church to church.

Those small towns were marked by diversity and poverty. "We were very poor," he later recalled. "But we didn't know we were poor. The whole town was poor."

Each congregation contained Ukrainians, Swedes and other recently arrived European settlers, with a smattering of Chinese new arrivals, struggling to survive the Great Depression, imbuing in the youngster the "Christian symbolism and moral outrage," as he later put it, that fired prairie socialism.

And when flooding forced the evacuation of a nearby town, the Cooks temporarily sheltered a Franco-Manitoban family, Ramsay's first close experience with French Canadians as a linguistic minority.

In 1940, the Cooks spent a summer month on Vancouver Island, to be close to Ramsay's brother Vincent, who had joined the army to serve in the Second World War. Eight-year-old Ramsay was befriended by a local Japanese-Canadian youth, who taught the Prairie boy how to fish. Ramsay Cook's first, sharp lesson in ethnic prejudice came in 1942, when the Canadian government interned Japanese Canadians. He wondered for the rest of his life what became of his young friend.

He forged in those early years his lifelong passions for diving and swimming, for birdwatching and beating all comers at billiards. Small in stature, he was also hot-tempered, known as much for dropping his gloves as for passing the puck. School was both effortless and boring, and it took a stern parental command to convince him to attend United College (today the University of Winnipeg), where he slotted in a first-year history course only because his much-preferred chemistry class was in a far-away building and he was too lazy to make the commute.

By the end of the first term, he was hooked. "He discovered a new language that allowed him to make sense of the world," observes Prof. Wright, a historian at University of New Brunswick. By the late 1950s, he was writing his PhD thesis on the Winnipeg journalist J.W. Dafoe at University of Toronto under the supervision of Donald Creighton, then Canada's pre-eminent historian.

Prof. Creighton was the most influential member of a school of intellectuals who believed the Canadian identity emerged out of the exploitation of natural resources along the St. Lawrence River basin – the Laurentian thesis. He envisioned Canada as a British-forged national alternative to the United States. But though Prof. Creighton and Prof. Cook admired, respected and were genuinely fond of each other, Prof. Cook instinctively rejected his mentor's Laurentian view of Canada, because it couldn't encompass Quebec or explain the Prairies.

"There was something almost patricidal about their relationship," Prof. Wright observes. "Ramsay Cook over the course of his career unwrote Donald Creighton's Canada."

Specifically, he rejected both Quebec ethnic nationalism – which was evolving from its Catholic roots into a secular commitment to separatism – and what he detected as an equally obnoxious WASP nationalism rooted in Southern Ontario.

"Ramsay Cook distrusted nationalism with every ounce of his being," Prof. Wright says, because "it didn't conform to his lived experience on the Prairies" – a United Nations of ethnicities worshipping together in his father's church. For Prof. Cook, it was often said, the problem with Canada was not a lack of nationalism, but an excess of nationalisms in conflict. For him, Canada had too many nationalisms for its own good.

One weekend, Prof. Creighton invited his protégé, his wife, Eleanor, and their baby daughter, Margaret (a son, Markham, would come along later) to his cottage in Muskoka, where the teacher put the student to work at cottage repair. At one point, as Prof. Cook painted the cottage floors, the two got into an argument over Quebec so intense that Prof. Cook ended up literally painting himself into a corner.

Prof. Cook's antipathy to nationalism drew him in the early 1960s to Pierre Trudeau, then a public intellectual living in Quebec. When Mr. Trudeau entered federal politics, becoming Liberal leader in 1968, Prof. Cook set aside his social-democratic convictions and became a Liberal, helping to craft the 1968 Just Society speech and serving briefly in the Prime Minister's Office after Mr. Trudeau's election victory, before returning to academia, convinced that politics was not for him.

Already, he was a leading figure in the Canadian academy. Macmillan published *Canada and the French-Canadian Question* in 1966 when Prof. Cook was teaching at University of Toronto. For Thomas Axworthy, who served as Mr. Trudeau's principal secretary from 1981-84, Prof. Cook "will forever be remembered as the intellectual guide to a perplexed undergraduate in United College, Winnipeg, trying to make sense of Jean Lesage and René Lévesque and finding in Ramsay Cook a new approach that helped me connect the dots."

In the 1960s, Prof. Cook began writing a regular column in *Le Devoir*. Beleaguered Quebec federalists of the time looked to him to explain English Canada to them, even as he explained Quebec aspirations and grievances to impatient English Canadians. "He was a very major figure in that respect," John English says. And he argued as well, in books and in classrooms, for the right of linguistic and cultural minorities to equal respect within the Canadian mosaic.

Prof. Cook, whose master's thesis on the internment of Japanese Canadians warned against the dangerous overreach of the War Measures Act, found his friendship with Mr. Trudeau strained when the prime minister invoked the act during the October Crisis of 1970. Under heavy guard, Mr. Trudeau visited the Cooks at their home to explain himself. The two men were in deep discussion, Eleanor remembers, "when I accidentally blew a fuse with a big coffeepot and everything went black.

"Everyone fell silent – struck, I suppose, with a sense of realpolitik near at hand – except for Trudeau, who calmly continued talking."

But Prof. Cook celebrated Mr. Trudeau's Charter of Rights and Freedoms as one of the great moments in the life of Canada – not least because it guaranteed the education rights of linguistic minorities – and joined him in opposing the Meech Lake accord. As a historian, Prof. Cook gradually moved past the national question, investigating the social evolution of Canada (*Canada 1896-1921: A Nation Transformed*, co-written with Craig Brown) and the 19th-century clash of the religious and the secular. (*The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada*, winner of the 1985 Governor General's Literary Award for Non-Fiction). He retired to become professor emeritus at York University in 1996, having arrived there in 1969. By then he was deeply involved in rescuing the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* from oblivion.

Launched in 1959, this landmark project seeks to chronicle the lives and times of Canadians from the year 1000 to the present in both official languages. But in the 1980s, with the original bequest that launched it exhausted, and government funding cut back, the project was on life support. Prof. Cook took over as general editor in 1989 and "very simply, he saved it," John English believes. "None of us knew he had it in him, but he went out and fundraised." Volumes 13 through 15, covering the years 1901 to 1930, were published on his watch, before Mr. English took over as general editor in 2006.

Ramsay Cook's last book, *The Teeth of Time*, arrived that same year, a poignant remembrance of his complicated friendship with Pierre Trudeau. By then the retired academic had collected a drawerful of honours, including the Tyrrell medal (Royal Society, 1975), the Order of the Sacred Treasure, bestowed by the Government of Japan in 1988 for his work in Japanese-Canadian studies, especially the internment, and the Molson Prize in the Humanities and Social Sciences (Canada Council, 2005). He was named an Officer of the Order of Canada in 1986.

Ramsay Cook leaves Eleanor (née Glen), his wife of 56 years, his two children and two grandchildren and his many friends and colleagues, who will remember him as a kind and generous man, whose occasional temper tempests soon blew over, as someone who always agreed to read what you had written, returning it promptly with corrections and encouraging words; as a clear and elegant writer and as a generous scholar who treated students and statesmen with equal courtesy.

For the two generations of historians whose understanding of Canada he helped shape, he is a landmark in the history of Canadian history. But he saw himself always, to the very end, as a small-town Prairie kid who, as Donald Wright has written, "hung out at the local pool hall playing snooker and smoking what he and his friends called two-centers, a single cigarette sold for two cents by a Chinese shopkeeper."

There were so many Canadas in that small town. Ramsay Cook sought to embrace them all.