

James Maurice Stockford Careless 1919-2009

If ever a person soared above the inherent liabilities of his name, it was historian J.M.S. (Maurice) Careless. As a scholar, writer, teacher and family man he was the antithesis of negligence. Of course, that didn't mean that his unusual moniker escaped titters and jokes, some of them made by the man himself.

Attached to External Affairs during the Second World War, Prof. Careless worked in Ottawa with Hume Wrong, son of historian George M. Wrong, preparing briefings for the Parliamentary Press Gallery. The official reports, which were always released under the heading "Wrong and Careless," gave wartime information bulletins an unlikely twist. Years later, as chair of the department of history at the University of Toronto, he liked to tell his students that having a professor named Careless shouldn't alarm them because an earlier department head had been named Wrong. And when historian Michael Bliss taught a course with him, it was dubbed Careless Bliss, although Prof. Bliss can't remember any of the students "being moved to fornicate in the aisles."

"He was one of the giants of Canadian history, a fine scholar, a delightful raconteur who conveyed to us the sensible notion that we should never take ourselves, or our profession, too seriously," said Prof. Bliss in an e-mail message.

"In my view," said historian Ramsay Cook, former general editor of the Dictionary of Canadian Biography, "Maurice's main distinction was that during the years when nationalist history was the dominant paradigm he held that local history, regional history, was the essential key to understanding Canada. He was right."

An undergraduate student of Donald Creighton and Frank Underhill, Prof. Careless taught at the University of Toronto for nearly four decades, attaining the distinguished rank of university professor and helping to build the department into a pre-eminent centre of Canadian history. He taught surveys and undergraduate seminars, supervised doctoral students and served as chairman of the history department from 1959 to 1967, an era of enormous expansion in hiring, a broadening of subject areas and a democratization of the curriculum, including the controversial abandonment of the four year honours program.

"As a student, I found him a very engaging seminar leader," said Robert Craig Brown, who arrived to do a masters degree in 1957 and returned as a faculty member in the early 1960s. "He demanded a lot of work out of his students, but he had an easy manner, which was quite different from my supervisor Prof. Creighton," although, according to Prof. Brown, he did sometimes require his students to supply him with cigarettes.

"I took his course in Old Ontario and later he supervised my [doctoral] thesis [on Canadian Imperialism]," said historian Carl Berger, who entered the U of T in 1961 as an MA student. "He wrote a lot on mid-Victorian Liberalism, which in some ways followed up where Frank Underhill left off, but he inverted Underhill, who believed ideas were just rationalizations for economic interest," said Prof. Berger.

By contrast, Prof. Careless took ideas and intellectual history seriously for their own sakes and felt "it was important what people believed at the time, no matter how ridiculous they seemed in retrospect."

In researching and writing his monumental two volume *Brown of The Globe*, his biography of George Brown, the reformer, editor of this newspaper and "mother" of Confederation, Prof. Careless uncovered a trunk of new letters and papers (which now reside in the Library and Archives Canada), developed his Metropolitan -Hinterland thesis (which helped spawn urban history as an academic study) and produced such a pellucid, engaging and colourful portrait that he won the Governor-General's literary award for non-fiction in 1963. That was his second GG award; he had won his first one a decade earlier in 1954 for his first book, *Canada: A Story of Challenge*.

He is not as well known outside the profession as Prof. Creighton, the biographer of John A. Macdonald and proponent of the Laurentian thesis (which argues that Canada, a supplier of staples to European economies, developed economically and politically along the St. Lawrence River and other transportation routes). Among historians and students, however, Prof. Careless is every bit as revered as a teacher, researcher, theorist, literary stylist and scholar. In a way, he is the affable yin to Prof. Creighton's crusty yang, and his metropolitan thesis is the counterpoint and refinement of Prof. Creighton's Laurentian thesis.

"I think his biography of Brown was a much more sophisticated biography than Creighton's *Macdonald*," said Prof. Berger. "That may be heretical, but Careless's *Brown* is a much more authentic portrait of a human being, whereas it is hard to believe in Creighton's *Macdonald*."

Heretical, it may be, but that opinion of the relative merits of the two magisterial biographies - and their authors-is shared by others. "His two volumes are a really fine instructive read in and of themselves," said Prof. Brown. "Donald had a very commanding presence. If Donald was in the room, you knew it. And Maurice, it wasn't that he was shy, it was that he was much more easy going," as a professor and a colleague. "He certainly had strong views about things, but he wasn't imperious," at least compared to Prof. Creighton, who could be "daunting."

Prof. Careless's life was not without stress. When he was 12, his right arm was amputated after he collided with a bus while riding his bicycle. Within the year, he was writing smoothly enough with his left hand that a teacher observed that his penmanship, then a highly prized skill, was now equally as bad as it had been before the accident. He didn't dwell on his infirmity. Instead, he coped by keeping his shoelaces done up, his neckties knotted and his empty right sleeve tucked into his jacket pocket.

He disarmed strangers with his deft left-handed greeting and impressed his good friend Freeman Tovell with his one-handed typing when they were graduate students at Harvard in the early 1940s. As for his children, they attest to their father's capacity to spank, build model trains, carve a turkey single handed, and work prodigiously. "Mom would go to bed at 10 o'clock and he would stay up until 3 a.m. writing," said his eldest son Anthony (Tone) Careless. And the next morning he would get up and go to the university to teach his courses, run his seminars and conduct the business of the department and the university.

"And yet, family was supremely important in a very busy life", said Prof. Brown. "That took precedence above everything else."

James Maurice Stockford Careless was born in Toronto three months after the end of the First World War, the younger son by about a decade of William Roy Careless, an electrical goods salesman and his wife, Ada de Rees. He attended North Toronto Collegiate, and then transferred to University of Toronto Schools, where he first became interested in cultural history, according to a biographical essay written by Frederick H. Armstrong for *Old Ontario: Essays in Honour of J.M.S. Careless*.

In 1936, he entered Trinity College at the University of Toronto. Canada and Britain were at war by the time Prof. Careless graduated with a history degree in 1940. Obviously not a candidate for active military service, he enrolled at Harvard. Already fascinated by ideas, the way they germinate in dense and diverse populations, how cities and regions develop independently of major centres and how newspapers can disseminate political ideas, he was thwarted from doing primary research in English repositories because of the war.

Eventually, following a suggestion from Prof. Underhill at the U of T, he determined to work on George Brown and the plentiful material available in The Globe newspaper files in Toronto. David Owen, at Harvard, agreed to supervise his thesis on Victorian liberalism in the Canadian colonial environment, even though the subject was technically outside his own field of expertise.

Later, Prof. Careless showed the same leniency and openness to his own graduate students, never expecting them "to write footnotes to his work," according to Prof. Berger. "He was one of those people for whom you could do virtually anything you wanted as long as you had a lot of evidence and you were pursuing a serious line of enquiry."

In the summer of 1939, Prof. Careless had met Betty Robinson, the daughter of industrialist Gordon Robinson at Jackson's Point on Lake Simcoe. They were married on New Year's Eve, 1941 in the chapel of Hart House at the U of T, with Mr. Tovell serving as best man and the Robinson family chauffeur waiting outside to rush the newlyweds to the registry office to obtain a Visa for the new Mrs. Careless so that she could return to Boston with her husband.

War intervened in his scholarly pursuits when Prof. Careless was seconded to the Naval Historian's Office in Ottawa in 1943 and then to External Affairs, working under diplomat Saul Rae on prisoner exchanges with the enemy as the war approached its inevitable conclusion. A Swedish liner, Gripsholm, transported Axis and Allied exchange candidates under a safe -

conduct agreement with the result that Prof. Careless was nicknamed "The Cruise Kid" because of his frequent sailings across the Atlantic, according to Prof. Armstrong's essay.

After the German and Japanese capitulations in 1945, Prof. Careless was hired as a lecturer in the history dept. at the U of T, and promoted to assistant professor in 1949 the year before he was granted his doctorate from Harvard. The next two decades were an incredibly busy time for the Carelesses as their family grew to include five children and he embarked on a bruising teaching and writing schedule. In the early years she can remember typing manuscript pages for him, after she put the children down for naps.

Prof. Careless succeeded Prof. Creighton as chair of the history department in 1959. He broadened, deepened and expanded the department and took "a more aggressive initiative towards consultation with his colleagues about matters of great importance to the department and the university, not least of all appointments. That was quite new in history and in the faculty," said Prof. Brown, who also noted that the department nearly doubled in the early 1960s and expanded to include Indian and immigration history, among other new fields.

When Prof. Careless retired in 1984, he was appointed university professor emeritus. Of course, retirement was merely a word. He continued to write prolifically, to sit on committees, to serve the profession and to expand the idea of history by serving as an adviser to regional history groups and documentary film units.

"He was a wonderful man, thoughtful, good sense of humour, and knew the history of the country intimately," said politician Bob Rae who was an undergraduate at the U of T in the Careless years. "My dad was fond of him, and this feeling was passed on to me."

Maurice Careless was born in Toronto on Feb. 17, 1919. He died there on April 6, 2009, after suffering a stroke. He was 90. Prof. Careless leaves his wife Betty, five children, 10 grandchildren and his extended family.

*Sandra Martin
Written for the Globe and Mail
Published on April 13, 2009*

(Author's title given as of the time of writing)