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The Quirky Dr Fay: A Remarkable Life

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Old historians, like old soldiers, don?t die; they simply fade away. A paradox of the historical profession is the widespread disregard shown towards ancestors. We all aspire to write groundbreaking work that will pass the test of time, but the sad truth is a given monograph will have a short shelf life and quickly join what G. M. Trevelyan called ?the great unread?.(1) Part of the problem lies in the exponential growth in the published output: quite simply, too much being produced for a single mind to read, much less absorb, more than a tiny fraction of the output. Another reason for posterity?s disdain was identified by Neil Jumonville, himself the biographer of an historian:

> History is really, ironically, the least grateful of disciplines ? it?s difficult for a historian to be remembered for his history. Historians tend to after 20 or 30 years, after a book is published, to throw it on the proverbial dust bin. And we don?t read our old historians like those in literature read their old greats. I mean in the field of history, we?re far more embarrassed by our past than we should be. You know, we don?t look back to our Melvilles or to our Emersons like those in literature do. And so really ironically, history is one of the least historical of the humanities in that respect.(2)

Many biographies of historians are rescue missions, written to restore a reputation which the biographer feels has unjustly fallen into abeyance. More often than not biographies of historians are about rediscovery, if not redemption, and Hugh Gault?s life of Charles Ryle Fay (1884?1961) is no exception. Gault clearly deplores that Fay?s star is so much on the wane (pp. vi, 182?4), despite Fay?s output of some 20 books. There is often also an affinity and sense of fellow feeling by biographers toward their subject, and again Gault is no exception. As he explains, he was initially attracted by Fay?s ?unconventional? *Huskisson and his Age* (1951). The attraction turned into a fascination about its author and he wants to share this fascination.

Fay entered Cambridge University in 1902 to read economics. He completed a DSc at LSE (published in 1908 as *Cooperation at Home and Abroad*), which Cambridge never recognised. Nonetheless, he returned to Cambridge in 1907 as a Fellow of Christ?s College. Wartime service interrupted his career but in 1921 he left for Canada as Professor of Political Economy at Toronto, returning to Cambridge in 1930 to a Readership that had been created for him (pp. 129?30). As Gault points out Fay was no narrow specialist but roamed the historiographic landscape: ?following his nose as a researcher where the facts and his interests led him? (p. 173) and ?continually connecting his personal experience with his professional interests? (p. 114). Grounded in the disciplines of economics and history (p. 7), he was something of a public intellectual in being an advocate of agricultural cooperation and women?s rights, as well as being active in various professional associations. A friend recalled that Fay was ?a memorable personality? (p. 108) and Gault?s summation is that ?His life was eventful, fast-paced, at times heroic and one lived to the full. Not all his writing was high quality, but his best was exciting, enjoyable and insightful? (p. 185).

All the more strange that Fay, whom Gault describes as ?a man who could make things happen? (pp. 132, 186), is so little known. In a recent journal article, Peter Ludlow observed that Fay is ?remarkable only for his obscurity?.(3) Part of the answer might perhaps be that Fay?s versatility meant that specialists might know one aspect of his output but be unaware of the rest. In support of this contention, one could mention that Fay has been most in evidence in writings relating to the Cambridge economists John Maynard Keynes and Alfred Marshall (4), rather than in writings relating to historians. And this despite making an important conceptual breakthrough, which Gault doesn?t mention, in formulating the idea of ?informal empire? ? the notion that European powers could exploit overseas areas economically without going to the trouble and expense of outright annexation (or ?formal empire?). This is a common enough scenario: findings become absorbed into the literature and their origins (and originator) are forgotten. But not quite: it is still remembered that the idea originated with Fay, although the concept is most commonly associated with Gallagher and Robinson's famous 1953 article on ?The Imperialism of Free Trade?.(5) Nor is Fay entirely forgotten as a Cambridge-based historian of empire. He gets mentioned in Ronald Hyam?s survey of such historians, but not to the same extent as J. W. Davidson, the founding father of Pacific Islands historiography, whose appropriation of ?informal empire? was important in defining the ?new? Pacific Islands historiography.(6) And one struggles to find Fay in the biographies of his contemporary historians in England. He is not mentioned in the biography of fellow economic historian Eileen Power and receives but a few passing mentions in the biography of Harold Temperley, a ?close friend? and best man at Fay?s wedding (pp. 25, 49, 140).(7) Fay?s obscurity is rather difficult to explain at times.

It is much the same for Canada. Fay gets a couple of brief mentions in biographies of his Toronto colleague Harold Innis, on one occasion being described as ?an established scholar with something of a reputation?.(8)

From the point of view of reputation, the paucity of mentions in colleagues? biographies is worrying enough. More serious is the almost complete silence about Fay in studies of the English-speaking historical profession in Canada.(9) The author of one of these works told me that Fay was ignored because he ?built his career outside of Canada and didn?t seem to correspond with Canadian historians?.(10) Fay not only started and consolidated his career in England (and later Northern Ireland) but he published little on Canadian history during his time at Toronto; his major work during this period was *Great Britain from Adam Smith to the Present Day* (1928).

The relative silence on Fay leaves his biographer with the field wide open. One strand of Gault?s discussion involves Fay the person. Gault uses the word ?quirky?, whose shades of meaning include ?idiosyncratic?, ?unusual?, ?peculiar?, ?odd?, ?strange? and ?unpredictable?. So what does ?quirky? really mean? Gault is under no illusions that Fay ?could be both an insufferable colleague at times and, perhaps frequently, difficult to live with? (p. 11). Unlike many recent biographies of historians, there is little here on the dynamics of Fay?s marriage (p. 182) or his family life, and this despite Gault having interviewed relatives and in-laws and immediate family members ? one of whom considered Fay ?insufficiently domesticated? (p. v). There is some discussion on relations with colleagues, but one gets little sense in the body of the text of Fay having an insufferable quality. Take the description by John Maynard Keynes (a fellow student at Cambridge) of Fay?s company during a mountaineering trip in the Pyrenees in 1907:

> Fay is only a qualified success, I think. Fortunately we like him, so it is not a failure but (1) ? Fay, being absolutely the worst walker and mountaineer I have ever seen, either delays us for hours, or has to be left behind; (2) he is too ugly. Ugliness of face, hands, body, clothes, manners are not, I find, completely overbalanced by cheerfulness, a good heart, and an average intelligence.(11)

Keynes is at his catty and patronising worst, but he does hint that Fay was not socially integrated to any marked degree. Gault makes the point that Fay suffered shell shock in the First World War and that he experienced at least three nervous breakdowns. There is more than a possibility that the shell shock exacerbated existing personality traits; in short, he was a strange and sometimes disconcerting man. I rather suspect that Fay and Temperley were good friends because the latter?s unlovely personality was an attraction. Fay?s ?quirkiness? would undoubtedly have prevented or impeded other friendships from developing. Whatever the case, the C. R. Fay that emerges in the text is a good deal mellower than the one foreshadowed in the book?s ?Introduction?, and it is a fair guess that much of the evidence from family members has been withheld.

Fay?s idiosyncrasies may have contributed to his success as a teacher of undergraduates. Not all biographies of historians deal with pedagogic issues but this one does (pp. 89, 101?2). On the other hand, no indication is given as to how Fay wrote his 20 or so books, some of which were substantial. It is almost as if they magically materialised out of nowhere. All this is to say that a biographer of an historian has to make tough choices as to what to put in and what to leave out, what to emphasise and what to elide. An intractable problem is the balancing act between the life and the works and the need to avoid concentrating on one to the undue exclusion of the other. There are, indeed, sterile intellectual biographies whose authors separate the private and the profession and seemingly deny that the circumstances of a given historian will influence how he or she thinks and writes.(12) Gault tends somewhat in the other direction. It is not that he ignores Fay?s *oeuvre*. Far from it. But extensively quoting the opinions of contemporary reviewers, although relevant, is no substitute for Gault?s own assessments. Gault does provide his own analysis from time to time, as distinct from summarising the contents (eg. pp. 86?7, 105?6, 172?4). More in the same vein would have been welcome.

Gault has made good use of numerous sets of personal papers in Cambridge and London. There are, however, some oversights. There is relevant material in a set of Fay Papers at the Fisher Library, University of Toronto, including a 1928 journal entitled ?Western Tour?, concerning farming in the Canadian west.(13)

More to the point, there is a more extensive set of Fay Papers in the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) in Belfast which contains drafts and research notes from the 1930s and correspondence from the late 1940s.(14) The likely reason these papers are in PRONI is because Fay, following his wife?s death in 1951, went to live with his son in Belfast, which he used as ?his base camp? until the end of his life (pp. v, 170).

Recourse to the material at PRONI would have strengthened Gault?s discussion of Fay?s final years and, in particular, his invitation by the Memorial University of Newfoundland, in 1953, to a deliver series of lectures, published three years later as *Life and Labour in Newfoundland*. Gault partially summarises the lectures (p. 176) but without mentioning their pronounced anti-Catholic and anti-Irish strain. Fay?s residence in Belfast only hardened these attitudes, whose expression caused considerable offence with his more ecumenical sponsors in Newfoundland. These points and more are revealed in Peter Ludlow?s previously-cited article on Fay?s Newfoundland excursion, which draws in part on the material in PRONI.(15) It also emerges from Ludlow?s discussion that Fay urged Newfoundlanders to preserve their historical records and to ?get their stories written down?. In appointing Fay, Memorial University sought to foster an interest in local history and in the process to enhance its scholarly reputation. Moreover, Memorial?s interest in collecting archival sources and in sponsoring local history continued well after Fay?s departure.(16) In short, the Newfoundland excursion is far more significant and interesting than Gault?s gloss would suggest.

In all, Hugh Gault (and Peter Ludlow) have done much to raise the profile and restore the reputation of a significant intellectual figure. Charles Ryle Fay has been rescued from the shadows and now has a place in the historiographical hall of remembrance.

Notes

1. Quoted in David Cannadine, *G. M. Trevelyan: A Life in History* (London, 1993), p. xii.Back to (1)
2. Neil Jumonville (interviewed by Jacki Lyden), ?Henry?s history?, National Public Radio, *Weekend All Things Considered*, 7 March 1999 <http://mailer.fsu.edu/~njumonvi/rev-hsc2.htm [2]> [accessed 24 September 2012]; Jumonville, *Henry Steele Commager: Midcentury Liberalism and the History of the Present* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1999).Back to (2)
3. Peter Ludlow, ?Searching for the past, writing for the present: Charles Ryle Fay and Newfoundland?s contested past?, *Acadiensis: Journal of the History of the Atlantic Region*, 39, 2 (2010), 90.Back to (3)
4. Most recently, Peter Groenewegen, *The Minor Marshallians and Alfred Marshall: An Evaluation* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 136?48.Back to (4)
5. C. R. Fay, ?The movement towards free trade, 1820?53?, in *The Cambridge History of the British Empire*, ed. J. Holland Rose, A. P. Newton and E. A. Benians (Cambridge, 1940), p. 399; John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, ?The imperialism of free trade?, *Economic History Review*, Second Series, 6, 1 (1953), 1?15; Dennis R. Hidalgo, ?The evolution of history and informal empire: *La Decena Trágica* in the British press?, *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, 23, 2 (2007), 318?19, n. 2; Andrew Thompson, ?Afterword: informal empire: past, present and future?, *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 27 (2008), 229 (Supplement: Special Issue on ?Informal Empire in Latin America?).Back to (5)
6. Ronald Hyam, ?The study of imperial and commonwealth history at Cambridge, 1881?1981: founding fathers and pioneering research students?, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 29, 3 (2001), 81?4, 88, 95 (Davidson); 77, 83, 89, 96, n. 11 (Fay); J. W. Davidson, *The Study of Pacific History: An Inaugural Lecture delivered in Canberra on 25 November 1954* (Canberra, 1955), p. 5; Davidson, ?Problems of Pacific history?, *Journal of Pacific History*, 1 (1966), 7. True to Cambridge snobberies, Davidson refers to ?Mr. C. R. Fay?. Having done postgraduate work in Pacific Islands history in the 1970s, I am already familiar with Fay, by name at least. This would ? or should! ? apply to any historian of the Pacific Islands of my generation.Back to (6)
7. Maxine Berg, *A Woman in History: Eileen Power, 1889?1940*. Cambridge, 1996); John D. Fair, *Harold Temperley: A Scholar and Romantic in the Public Realm* (Newark, DE, 1992), pp. 39, 225, 295, 310, n. 2.Back to (7)

8. Donald Creighton, *Harold Adams Innis: Portrait of a Scholar* (Toronto, 1957), pp. 54 (quotation), 55, 76; Alexander John Watson, *Marginal Man: The Dark Vision of Harold Adams Innis* (Toronto, 2006), pp. 139, 197.Back to (8)
9. Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing since 1900* (Toronto, 1986), pp. 90, 92; Donald Wright, *The Professionalization of History in English Canada* (Toronto, 2005); Jennifer Hamel, ?A brief history of the writing (and re-writing) of Canadian National History?, MA thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 2009.Back to (9)
10. Donald Wright, e-mail to reviewer, 4 June 2012.Back to (10)
11. Quoted in Robert Skidelsky, *John Maynard Keynes: Hopes Betrayed, 1883?1920* (London, 1983), p. 180. Yet Keynes considered *himself* to be ugly! Skidelsky, pp. 67, 169.Back to (11)
12. Eg. Robert Cole, *A. J. P. Taylor: The Traitor within the Gates* (Basingstoke, 1993); C.T. McIntire, *Herbert Butterfield: Historian as Dissenter* (New Haven, CT, London, 2004).Back to (12)
13. See <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/fisher/collections/findaids/fay.pdf [3]> and < http://www.worldcat.org/title/charles-ryle-fay-papers/oclc/225721217 [4]> [accessed 24 September 2012].Back to (13)
14. See <http://www.rascal.ac.uk/index.php?CollectionID=49&navOp=locID&navVar=24 [5]> [accessed 24 September 2012]. There is some ambiguity. Gault mentions that Fay?s 1955 unpublished manuscript ?Huskisson and Irish affairs? is held by PRONI, although he does not specifically mention the Fay Papers (pp. 172, 219), but there is no sign that he has used the correspondence in this collection.Back to (14)
15. Ludlow, ?Charles Ryle Fay and Newfoundland?s contested past?, 89?108; and Ludlow, e-mails to reviewer, 10 July and 12 July 2012. I am most grateful to Dr Ludlow for his readiness to exchange information and insights.Back to (15)
16. Jeff A. Webb, ?Revisiting fence building: Keith Matthews and Newfoundland historiography?, *Canadian Historical Review*, 91, 2 (2010), 315?38.Back to (16)

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