

Christianity, Judaism and George Grant

EXILES FROM NOWHERE: THE JEWS AND THE CANADIAN ELITE

Alan Mendelson. Robin Brass Studio, Montreal, 2008.

Reviewed by Gene Homel

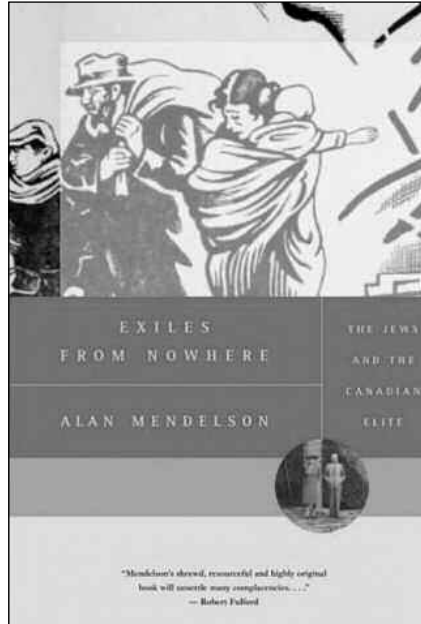
One of the most influential manifestos of Canadian politics in the last few decades must surely be *Lament for a Nation*, academic philosopher George Grant's *cri de coeur* about what he saw as the inevitable passing of Canadian nationhood. When this little book was issued in 1965, Canadian nationalists were both challenged and inspired, despite Grant's tone of resigned pessimism.

For Grant, the American empire's technologically-based capitalism subverted the patriotic attachments and conservative traditions that crucially defined the continued existence of Canada.

At the heart of the book was a critique of "modernity," of the power of technology and technological attitudes to subvert moral values. According to Grant, continentalist attitudes and the embrace of technology by the Canadian business and bureaucratic classes spelled an inevitable end to Canada. Diefenbaker's defeat on the issue of nuclear weapons on Canadian soil was Grant's case in point.

Most Canadians outside the academy probably don't remember George Grant, who died in 1988. That may change slightly with his nephew Michael Ignatieff's new book *True Patriot Love*. Ignatieff maintains that Grant's *Lament* in "defence of a conservative Christian Canada" was simply wrong. For Ignatieff, the Canadian-American differences are more major and enduring than Grant recognised, the declining British connection was not as crucial as Grant

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thought, and the "the reassertion of ethnicity, language and race as markers of national identity in the modern world" appears to negate Grant's assumptions about the triumph of American imperial domination and conformity.

In a sense, Grant's *Lament* for the disappearance of his Canada rings truer than Ignatieff acknowledges. Not only have Red Toryism and Canadian nationalism pretty much disappeared as political forces since the mid-1980s, but the Anglo-Saxon image of Canadian society that is assumed in *Lament* is no longer as dominant as when Grant wrote his manifesto.

Grant receives much tougher treatment in another recent book, *Exiles from Nowhere: The Jews and the Canadian Elite* (Robin Brass Studio, 2008), by Alan Mendelson, an emeritus professor of religious studies and former colleague of Grant's at McMaster University. Mendelson presents an extensive case that Grant was anti-Semitic, that for him "most Jews were inherently different from other people, that they were hostile to Christianity, and that overall, Jewish

influence on society tended to be harmful or even dangerous."

Mendelson covers ground familiar to historians of English-speaking Canada: the "genteel," parlour anti-Semitism, centred in urban Ontario, that was so much a part of the country's social fabric through the 1950s, when Jewish students were still restricted by quotas at the University of Toronto medical school. Mendelson reminds us of the obvious connection between "genteel" anti-Semitism and "tangible consequences in the real world," such as the exclusion from Canada of the refugee Jews of Europe in the 1930s and 1940s.

Still, while Mendelson presents sufficient snippets by Grant (mostly from his personal and private comments) that show that he was, at times, unsympathetic toward and suspicious of Jews, Mendelson's book is far from an unqualified success as a critique of Grant. Students of Grant's thought will not find anything on Grant's major preoccupations with the impact of technology and technique. Instead, Mendelson follows the much more minor byways of Grant's attitudes to Jews, without relating these to Grant's major writings, though he does cite Grant's unhelpful comment that German Naziism was an "instinctual" reaction to the alienation caused by technology. By contrast, in European history writing, the perceived relationships between Jews and "modernity" have been a fruitful, much-explored avenue.

In a way, Mendelson has produced two books. Before turning to Grant, the first half of his book looks at the attitudes towards Jews of a small group of historic English-Canadian public figures, who stand in for "the Canadian elite." Many of these figures are ancestors, relatives or connections of Grant's—Mendelson's key point is that Grant imbibed anti-Semitism in his mother's milk. Grant's prejudices were part of a family tradition deriving from public intellectuals George M. Grant, a principal of Queen's University, and two headmasters of Upper Canada College,

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Sir George Parkin and W.L. Grant, not to mention Vincent Massey, diplomat and first Canadian Governor General, or numerous female relatives who married into influential families.

Mendelson, though, has been selective in choosing individuals who he thinks prove his case on the anti-Semitism of “the Canadian elite.” Political and intellectual leaders who were tolerant in their attitudes toward Jews are not discussed, though Mendelson does refer in passing to University of Toronto scholar Northrop Frye to demonstrate that rejection of anti-Semitism was a contemporary option. Moreover, the topic of Canadian “elites” is a complex and contested one, and some fuller definitions of the elite, referencing authors John Porter and Wallace Clement among others, would have been useful.

While one doesn’t have to be a Canadian historian to write Canadian history, Mendelson’s weak grasp of the ideas and context of historic figures such as George Parkin limits the book’s value. A flippant tone confirms the author’s limitations: for example, William Lyon Mackenzie’s “fifteen minutes of fame came in 1837 when he led an armed force down Yonge Street toward Toronto.” Likewise, Prime Minister Mackenzie King considered appointing Massey as Canadian minister to Washington because Massey “needed some cheering up”—the latter had recently been defeated as a Liberal candidate for the House.

Mendelson begins by discussing the nineteenth-century anti-Semitism of transplanted British professor and controversialist Goldwin Smith, a case ably handled in 1992 by Canadian historian Gerald Tulchinsky in *Antisemitism in Canada*, and integrated into his recent book *Canada’s Jews: A People’s Journey*. Mendelson asserts that “Smith was highly successful” in transmitting the anti-Semitic virus to Canada’s educated elite “until the middle of the twentieth century and beyond.” For example, Quebec nationalist MP Henri Bourassa (who seems out of place in a book on English Canadian

elites) is said to have “pass[ed] on the torch, once held by Goldwin Smith, to a younger generation, which included future philosopher George Parkin Grant.”

This tenuous notion seems more than a bit simplistic, even conspiratorial. In any case, I’m not convinced that Smith’s influence, and the acceptance of his ideas, were all that pervasive. For example, Smith’s most prominent political campaign in the late nineteenth century was to fight the British imperial tie and to advocate union between Canada and the United States. On these and other topics, Smith’s ideas were widely rejected, by the elite and the masses, and he mostly clashed with Grant’s ancestors George M. Grant and George Parkin.

Mendelson surveys the anti-Semitic attitudes of Prime Minister King and Massey, reminding the reader that their attitudes did affect public policy. This topic was masterfully handled by Irving Abella’s and Harold Troper’s *None is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe 1933-1948*.

Clearly, by 1939 when young George Grant departed from Queen’s for Oxford and his position as a Rhodes scholar, he had, according to Canadian historian Arthur Lower in 1956, “as much of family behind him as it is possible to have in this country.” Once in Britain, Grant’s pacifism and sympathy for appeasement were views widely held before and in the early stages of World War Two, but provide no real evidence for Grant’s anti-Semitism. Grant, like others, was not in a position to know about the Nazi genocide of the Jews until the latter stages of the war.

In the most useful section of the book, Mendelson focuses on four thinkers who aroused Grant’s enthusiasm over many years: English historian Arnold Toynbee, German philosopher Martin Heidegger, French anti-Semitic novelist Louis-Ferdinand Celine, and French-Jewish writer and mystic Simone Weil. Each was tainted in varying degrees by antagonism to Jews or Judaism, most notably Celine, though that doesn’t prove that

Grant endorsed all their views. In the case of Heidegger, Grant embraced the value of Heidegger’s philosophy while rejecting his pro-Nazi stance.

The writings of Toynbee and Weil allow Mendelson to reiterate his book’s key points about Christian triumphalism and supersessionism: that for believers like Grant, Christianity had historically and spiritually superseded Judaism and would triumph over all competing faiths. The idea of Judaism as a fossilised remnant, while appealing to Grant and many other Christians, is not likely to appeal to religious Jews, secularists, some liberal Christians, and probably adherents of other faiths. Yet this idea hardly makes Grant an anti-Semite, in the proper sense of the term.

Certainly Grant emerges as a man with ethnocentric blind spots—particularly, insensitivities towards Jews and Judaism. Late in his career he privately criticized what he claimed was Jewish control of the media. But there are key differences historically between the nearly two-thousand-year Christian rejection of Judaism, and the pseudo-scientific, racially based anti-Semitism that emerged with such tragic consequences in late-nineteenth-century Europe. The latter does not seem to have attracted Grant.

Perhaps the best judgment rests with novelist Matt Cohen, an assimilated, secular Jew, who extensively discussed his complex relationship with Grant at McMaster in his memoir *Typing*. Cohen pointed out that Grant was a “bundle of contradictions.”

Given Grant’s condemnation of what he called “gutter anti-Judaism,” his acts of kindness and support for individual Jews such as Cohen, and his friendships with Jewish colleagues, a more rounded picture should emerge. One colleague, Louis Greenspan, wrote *The Globe and Mail* in December that Mendelson’s book does not portray “the man I knew for 35 years as colleague and close family friend. Many other of his Jewish associates would say the same.” ♦