

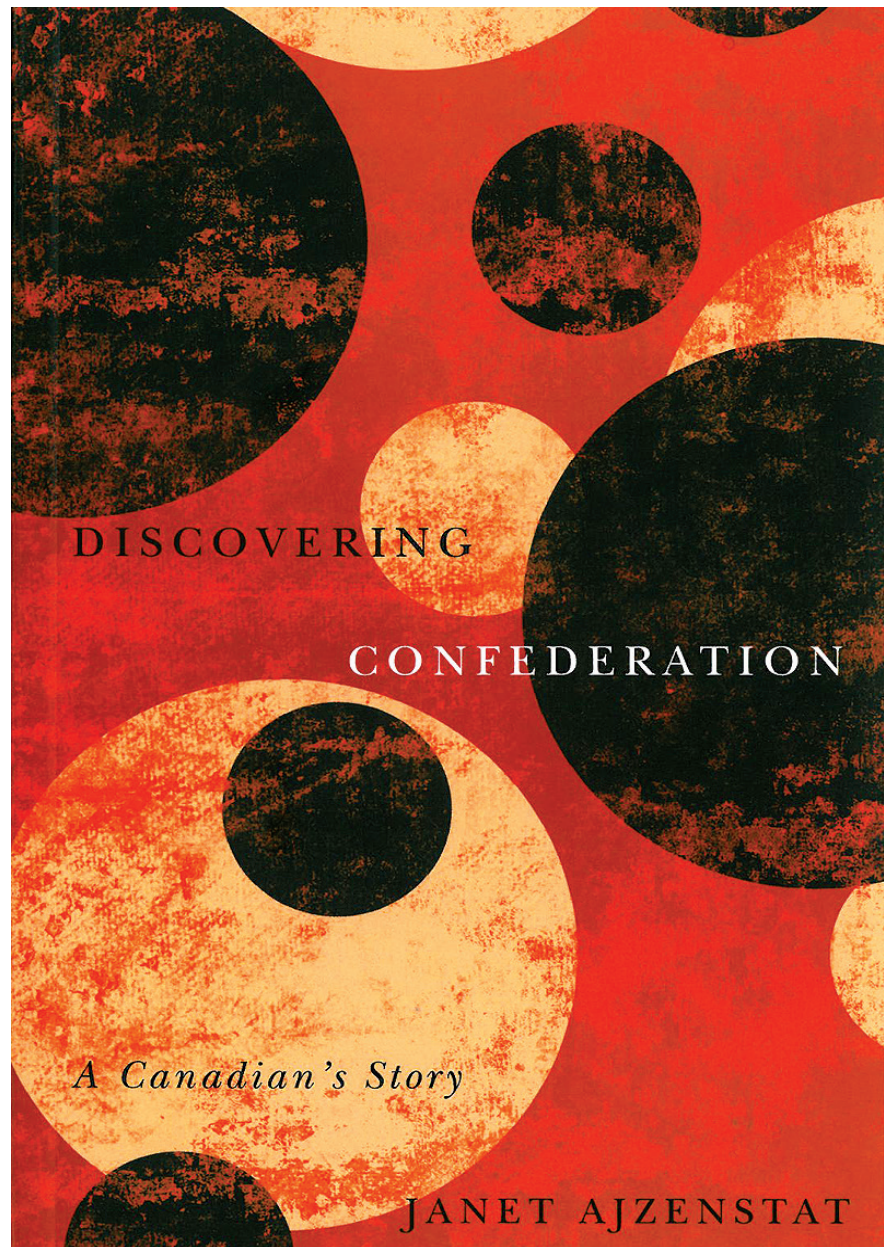


Parliamentary Book Shelf

**Discovering Confederation:
A Canadian's Story** by Janet
Ajzenstat, McGill-Queen's
University Press, Montreal &
Kingston, 158p.

Janet Ajzenstat tells us that her mentor at the University of Toronto, Allen Bloom, once advised her to take up a great book and read it sympathetically – make the best case you can for your author, he exhorted. It is easy to read this book – a welcome intellectual biography by Canada's leading authority of its political origins – sympathetically. Indeed, there is much to admire in this glimpse at a political philosopher who came to appreciate the 1867 Canadian constitution and its version of parliamentary democracy.

Beginning with her graduate studies at McMaster at age 36, under the influence of George Grant and his *Lament for a Nation* (whose nineteenth century collectivism she later rejects), and then moving to the University of Toronto for doctoral work under Blooms' tutelage (he would later author the academic bestseller, *The Closing of the American Mind*), Ajzenstat attends to the rough outlines of her scholarly career. Serendipitously, it seems, Ajzenstat took up Lord Durham's Report of 1849 as her great text. Her dissertation and the resulting publication (*The Political Thought of Lord Durham*) remain the best introduction to Durham's political philosophy.



Moving to Philadelphia after her marriage to the late Samuel Ajzenstat, she joined the anti-war movement and other socialist causes before heading

to McMaster University where her beloved Sam secured a job in the philosophy department. Starting her academic career late, and with two children at home,

Ajzenstat began seeking academic positions wherever she could find them. Initially denied a post at McMaster, she taught at Calgary and then Brock, before finally returning to McMaster with a faculty position in hand at age 57. With mandatory retirement in place, she had eight years of full-time teaching left to her.

These outlines serve as backdrop against which the ideas in this little book flow. *Discovering Confederation* is all about ideas. Her preoccupation with Lord Durham and liberal constitutionalist Pierre Bédard, and her interest in Confederation and Canadian constitutional reform have been about unearthing the liberal foundations of the Canadian political project as a framework for debate among political ideologies.

She repudiates the Hartz-Horowitz thesis: that Canada was founded by American loyalists who were in pursuit of a conservative collectivism that later enabled a socialist left to emerge as a viable political option. This “revisionist” account ignores the study of our “institutional foundations” and merely provides cover for Canadian nationalist and anti-American sentiment, she maintains. Ajzenstat insists, therefore, that we first “read the documents.” We will then hear what the framers thought and believed.

She subsequently read the Confederation debates, not only in the Parliament of Canada but also in other provinces, with her co-editors William Gairdner, Ian Gentles and Paul Romney resulting in the publication of the encyclopedic *Canada’s Founding Debates*. In the course of this exercise, she finds “no trace”

of the “heirarchy, deference and communalism” associated with the Hartz-Horowitz thesis. Instead, she and her co-editors discover a sophisticated liberal constitutionalism that is informed by John Locke and by understandings of popular sovereignty (more fully elaborated in her 2007 book *The Canadian Founding: John Locke and Parliament*). This is not a history bereft of ideas, as leading Canadian historians have proclaimed, but a record brimming full of them.

Having allied herself with conservative political thinkers and having rejected trendy culturalist accounts of Canada’s origins, it would appear that Ajzenstat’s sentiments lie firmly on the right side of the political spectrum. She hints otherwise in her book. After having embraced anti-war socialism in her youth, she admits to having “shed some” of those values – only some of them, she provocatively hints. She chooses not to let us in on the details.

Instead, she stresses her preferred understanding of liberal constitutionalism: as one of “unconstrained” deliberation. Constitutionalism is not about entrenching the policy preferences of a fleeting majority – a constitution of “partial interests ... not legitimately foundational” – but about facilitating reasonable disagreement on pressing matters of public policy. Parliament, from this angle, amounts to an “endlessly contested meeting” in which there is no “permanent agenda.” There are no perpetual winners or losers; rather, political

victory remains a possibility for all political forces. Parliamentary democracy thereby is open to all political ideologies and possibilities.

This openness is one of the great merits of democratic practice, observed de Tocqueville in the nineteenth century. It is tumultuous – an “agitation, constantly reborn” – with a capacity to repair its mistakes. Ajzenstat leaves us with an appealing account of Canadian parliamentary democracy, one that many Canadians will readily want to sign on to.

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