WILLIAM LEWIS MORTON
Interviewed by Gerald Friesen
Edited by Gerald Friesen

Introduction

William Lewis Morton was the dean of western Canadian historians from the 1940s, when his first distinguished essays appeared, until his death in 1980. He was a Manitoban, though he taught in Ontario between 1966 and 1975, and he was a Canadian. A man with an enormous capacity for work, he made his mark as a teacher and scholar dedicated to community service, as a defender of civil liberties and as a firm conservative. He was English in cultural outlook and historical sympathy, a monarchist, and a strong defender of a federal, bilingual state. He believed in the advantages of pluralism. And he believed in the necessity of a distinctive Canadian nation within North America. His words articulated a vision of Canada that found a response among an entire generation of Canadians.

Morton at Oxford c1934
(third from left in the shell)
(Provincial Archives of Manitoba N12828)

Morton was born in Gladstone, Manitoba in 1908 and grew up on the family farm. He attended the Church of England college at the University of Manitoba, won the Rhodes Scholarship in 1932, and returned from Oxford to lecture at the same College three years later. With the exception of a brief stay at Brandon College in western Manitoba between 1940 and 1942, he taught at Manitoba's provincial university for the next thirty-one years. He joined the faculty of Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario in 1966 but returned to Manitoba after his retirement.

Though he occupied a number of administrative posts and accepted several important public responsibilities, he will be remembered especially for his writing. Morton was the author, co-author or editor of twelve books and over sixty articles and booklets. In order to sustain this prodigious output, he adhered to an exceptionally demanding schedule. What stands out in retrospect is the depth of research and breadth of vision in his work. His writing was marked by a sensitivity to place, character and institutional context that was truly impressive.

The following interview was conducted in the fall of 1979. An abridged version appeared in the first issue of *Manitoba History*, an historical magazine published by the Manitoba Historical Society. Morton had been given the subject areas in advance but, even so, his command of language will be evident. He spoke in sentences and paragraphs. His speech was measured and was marked by an English inflection. His kindness and formal,

courteous manner were very much in evidence.

The Interview

F: What was your childhood like?

M: My childhood, I think, was a happy one. At least, I look back on it as being happy. All sorts of things intervene over so many years, of course, and I suppose one tends to forget some things and over-remember others. But it was a happy childhood and I look back on it with great fondness. I think this was owing partly to the fact that it was a country childhood and there was always lots to do both in the form of work and the form of play. It was also owing to my parents who were loving and fond though basically strict. I think we were well brought up without it being oppressive. There was a quiet insistence on being truthful which I particularly remember; that is so basic to all good living because without truth what else stands up. Also we were always urged to be brave. I remember this because I think I was a natural coward, I was always staggering from panic to panic but that too was a good thing....

I was the eldest child and I was a boy and the next two were girls. So in many ways I was isolated in that for some years I was the only child, you see. Then, after my sisters came, I was still in a sense an only because I was an only boy. It wasn't that my sisters and I didn't play together and get along very well, I think in a rather silly way they looked up to me as a wonderful being and I hope I wasn't too oppressively rude to them. There were four and six years between us.

F: Did you have more chores to do around the house than they did?

M: Oh, yes, I think I worked a great deal, looking back, but it didn't bother me--I was a glutton for being helpful. I remember one of my vivid memories of childhood was washing the dishes when I had to stand on a chair to be high enough to come up to the sink. Then I became in charge of the wood. Of course, our house was heated entirely by wood and all the cooking was done with wood. Our farm was heavily wooded and we were dependent on it for subsistence. And I used to bring the wood in and then I kept the fire going. When I was younger I got the kindling, then in time I was big enough to split the wood, you see.

F: Was your father a farmer at this time; would he have been farming himself?

M: Oh yes, all this time.

F: And did he have hired hands?

M: Yes, one or two always. And there was always what we called the hired girl....She was a very important member of the family because she *was* a member of the family. She would always be a local girl from the neighbour's farm and so there was a bond there. And she would be congenial, as a farm girl herself.

F: Did you have much time away from the chores to read or play?

M: Oh yes, I played a great deal by myself, with a dog and all that sort of thing. And when I learned to read I remember reading all day on occasions.

F: In "An Unliterary Landscape" you noted that you read avidly.[1] Would you say that you were a bookworm in your younger days?

M: Well, I was, except that I was spared from it by the farm life and the fact that when I got bored reading I could go and play, and that regularly I had to stop reading and do the chores.

F: Did you play with other children?

M: Well, when there were other children to play with, yes. I wasn't a recluse or

anything like that but normally I had to entertain myself.

F: Would you spend much time in town?[2]

M: Well we went in at least every Saturday night, you know, and sometimes oftener; my mother had a sister in town and she had a family and I used to go in and visit them and so on....we would renew acquaintances. There was always the shopping to do and eventually we would come home, drive home through the darkness.

F: Would you eat in town?

M: Not really.

F: Why?

M: People didn't eat out.

F: What was the local school like--the primary school?

Gladstone, Manitoba c1910
(Provincial Archives of Manitoba N12830)

M: There was a little one room school; it was quite a good one. It had been built in 1914, just a year or so before I began to attend, I guess. It was a very old school district, number eight, I think. Palestine, as it was called then, was a very old settlement and my great grandparents had had a large family and were very active in organizing the school early on. Well, it was a one-room school with one teacher, ungraded, everything from grade one to grade eight.

F: The same teacher for much of your earlier years?

M: Yes. The teachers tended to stay quite awhile, often they were local girls, you see. They lived with their families or they came from elsewhere and boarded around, boarded with one family or another in the district. It was a great experience for me. I enjoyed school very much and ate things up and I could always do the work so quickly that I'd be left alone with a book.

F: Were you a scholar in primary school?

M: I never thought of it that way. I suppose I did my work faster. I was always very careless, as I still am. I do things quickly. And I never learned to write. I still haven't. I remember labouring over it--trying to master calligraphy.

F: What was your strong suit in primary school? Were you good at maths, for example?

M: Well, I never had any difficulty with math as long as it was arithmetic. I ran into great difficulty later in high school with algebra. I never mastered it. But you see, from the age of twelve until I left university, I never opened a term. I had to work on the farm 'till the harvest was in before I could go to school or even before I could go to university.

F: What was it like in the school yard outside class hours?

M: Well, it was part of an old field. It was level, well cultivated, and (provided) lots of playing room. There was a little bluff[3] that ran to the north the length of the school yard and we used to climb the trees there and play hide and seek. The old school, the original school, had been made into the stable. A good many of the children came so far they had to drive, you see, and the horses had to be stabled all day. Then there was a slough in one corner which in spring was a rather lovely

bit of water, and then just a quarter-mile to the south there was another quite large slough which would have water most summers.

F: Did you play on the ice when it was melting in the spring?

M: Oh yes, we used to run on the ice and the ice would go up and down.

F: Was there organized sport?

M: Oh there were games but they weren't organized. The teacher didn't teach them, they were passed on from child to child--prisoner's base and so on.

F: Not baseball or hockey?

M: Yes, we played baseball though we had no equipment. Any equipment we had I supplied; I happened to have a bat and a catcher's mitt and a mask, I think. I was given them by relatives and I just took them to school and everyone played with them.

F: Do you remember how you felt as a school child? In a given group, there may be school bully and a scholar, and a number of other types; did you fit a particular role in primary school?

M: Oh, I used to get beaten up quite a bit because in ways I wasn't aware of, I was different. I would have to speak of the place of my family in the neighbourhood to explain this, but I was different, and I suppose I made other people impatient and got into scraps.

F: How were you different?

M: Well, I talked differently for one thing and I was interested in things the other children knew nothing about. Books, notably.

F: England?

M: Yes, we were English, you see, and my family was English though they'd been Canadian for quite awhile; we were Anglican[4] and we rather stood out. Though my father was always popular, he was very careful never to let any difference arise. We had to develop a kind of dual way of living, we had our own way of living and then we conformed to the neighbourhood way of living.

F: What was that neighbourhood way?

M: Essentially, it was very simple; any form of pretention was instantly seized on, put down; difference was thought to be a form of pretention, you see. I think this was the root of the trouble I had. I don't mean to exaggerate.

F: It wouldn't be significant in terms of daily contact?

M: No, no, it would just blow up every so often.

F: Did you have fights then?

M: Oh yes.

F: In the school yard?

M: Oh yes.

F: Did you win?

M: Sometimes.

F: Were you strong?

M: I was a farm boy.

F: Did Gladstone have a good high school?

M: Yes. It was an old one too; it had a good tradition and we had some very good teachers. I always remember Cameron Langel who was the language teacher--very good in French though I never became very good in French. He was a very charming man. Students were devoted to him.

F: Do you remember being attracted to history in high school?

M: I took it in my stride. I liked it and was good at it. The only time I wasn't

good was once I was caught out and I peeked at my book--I copied. I failed on that paper, the only time I ever failed. I suppose it was because I was caught short by not being at school or something. I was always good at history, but I don't remember any special fondness for it.

F: Did you have a favourite subject?

M: I don't think so. I liked all forms of literature--that's where my reading came in--but I didn't dislike arithmetic. It was fun in its way. It was all very simple stuff of course.

F: Did you stay with your aunt in town?

M: No, no, we went in three and half miles-in and out everyday.

F: With a horse?

M: With a horse, yes. I walked occasionally when I got bigger but that wasn't feasible. It took too much time.

F: Did you find the farm work and especially the harvests becoming more onerous as you grew older?

M: I first drove a stook team--that is a team of horses with a rack which picked up the stooks and took them to the threshing machine--when I was twelve but I was just filling in at the end of the season. Someone had gone away and there was a neighbour in distress who had to be threshed. We all thought he had a problem. He was very hard up. We had to thresh the crop that hadn't been bound because he had no money to buy binder twine.

F: So you were almost a regular farm hand in your early teens?

M: At thirteen I was, which was normal for the neighbourhood.

F: You said in "Unliterary Landscape" that you were conscious, when you started to work behind a plow, of being the last generation to plow virgin land. Could you elaborate on this?

M: You must realize that by this time, to be big enough to hold a breaking plow, I must have been fifteen or sixteen at least. Well, for one thing the farm we lived on--the original quarter--had been homesteaded by my grandfather Morton and the first fields were broken by him. And then my father, when he came back to the farm after his college days, broke too. And every summer we would break so much land. The Indians would come down in the spring, clear the bush off it and then, in July, there would be the breaking. It was part of the season, like haying and harvesting and so on. So I was conscious of it in that way. Then, I think, talk of pioneer days and so on in the family circle and in the neighbourhood circles made one think of it too. It was a general activity that everybody participated in more or less. And finally, I suppose some of my reading must have made me super-conscious, so to speak, and given me a perspective that one wouldn't acquire by the actual experience or by local talk.

F: Were you conscious of making history?

M: I think, in a sense, one always was--being of a pioneer family and of a family that had organized the local institutions or taken part in organizing the local institutions. My great-grandfather had been a justice of the peace, for example. He on one occasion had to send a man after a murderer, in his flamboyant way ordering him to bring him back dead or alive.

F: Where was that?

M: In Palestine, (the original name of Gladstone, Manitoba). Oh yes, and in the Fenian invasion of 1871 my same great-grandfather set off to walk to Winnipeg with his rifle to rally to the cause. Well all these things came down and so one was conscious of being in history.[5]

F: Did your family have a distinct consciousness of community responsibility?

M: Yes, that was very definite. My father you see was always in politics almost from the first--municipal politics and later provincial politics.

F: When did he leave home to become a politician resident in Winnipeg?

M: Oh not until my university days, about 1930.

F: But you didn't go to university until you were 24?

M: Oh no, I went when I was 20.

F: So there was a brief gap between the time when you completed high school and went to university?

M: Yes, you see I failed my grade 11 or at least I threw it up because I had so much trouble with algebra, and I was dubious as to whether I wanted any more education. I really thought I might stay on the farm, you know. My whole life had been on the farm and I was a competent farmer. I could have stayed on. In many ways I thought I was better than my father, I was a better workman than he was. Of course, I had no experience in managing a farm. I was to have that before I left. So I was doubtful and I pulled out of school. Then, that made me realize that in fact I did want to go on so I took a year to stagger through algebra.

F: So you became interested in going to college?

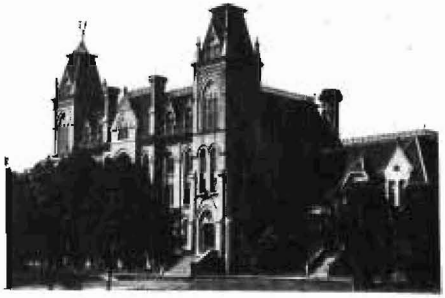
M: I suppose I did. Going to university was an almost unheard of thing in the countryside at that time. What was most talked of--and more talked of than done--was going to agricultural college, still a comparative novelty and people thought it was the proper thing to do to improve oneself as a farmer in a farming community you see. But in my family one of my mother's sisters had gone to university and got her degree and had become a school teacher, (first-rate one by the way). Then one of my cousins in Gladstone went on to university and I started reading all her books you see, so in a sense I'd taken university before I ever got there. That roused in me the ambition to go on, too, and here the miraculous thing was that there was no opposition in the family. I don't think they were particularly pleased but they didn't oppose and an uncle of mine, who was childless, made it financially possible. I didn't know this for many years.

F: I see. Now when did you come to the campus of St. John's College?[6]

M: I went to St. John's College in the North End in the fall of 1928.

F: Did you live in residence?

M: No. I lived in another uncle's house for awhile and lived in residence part of the time. There were two years there before my family moved in, then I lived with them.



St. John's College, Winnipeg
(Provincial Archives of Manitoba N10844)

F: How was St. John's as an experience in college life, did you enjoy it?

M: Oh very much, my family had always gone to St. John's because we were, as I think I said earlier, Anglicans, and all my uncles had gone there. My father had, though he didn't stay. It was my grandfather's belief that every son should have a profession and the one chosen for my father was medicine and he didn't like

English (and I think it was) but in my fourth year--and having to decide what I would do at Oxford crystallized this--I decided I didn't have what it took to be good in English. I didn't think I had enough imagination or enough critical sharpness. So I switched to history where I found myself more at home. This was partly influenced by the lack of any very strong personalities among the teachers of English at that time and by the presence of a very strong personality in Noel Fieldhouse in history. He influenced me very much. So did R. O. MacFarlane, who had just come in from Harvard.

F: Did your experience in Manitoba turn you toward the study of history at Oxford?

M: Towards history, but not decisively, because what I read at Oxford was not history but Modern Greats which left a way open to journalism, you see. Actually while at Oxford I did some writing and sent things back to the Winnipeg *Free Press*. I interviewed some farmers, for example, about English farming and when I was in Italy I wrote a screed of articles on Fascism which they didn't print. I was so interested they thought I was tainted, at least I think so. They may just have been too long.

F: Were you struck by the intellectual power of your teachers and of the scholarship that they exhibited?

M: I suppose I should say yes, but I cannot honestly say so, no. I was grateful to them for their learning but they were all very quiet and modest people. Noone was overwhelming.

F: What did your Oxford instructors give you?

M: They gave me a great reverence and care for simple and direct thinking and speaking. That was the essential thing at Oxford. Then they did lead me to decide not to be a journalist but to be a historian if I could be. So it was all a period of resolution.

F: In the article on an "Unliterary Landscape" you said, "at some point I set myself to reconstruct the actual landscape of the West." When was that?

M: After I came back and began teaching history here.

F: So it was then that you determined that the West would be your first field of history writing?

M: I think so, it was largely due to the results of having been away for three years, you see, and coming back and seeing it all afresh, with something of an outside perspective now. And I decided that I did want to come back, you see.

F: Not to Canada generally but to Manitoba?

M: Manitoba yes.

F: What was it about Manitoba that made you think you should come back here?

M: Oh I think it was the result of my experience as a child, my whole upbringing.

F: But with the whole country at your disposal, would it not seem unusual to go back to the place of your birth?

M: I think it did to some people you know, because it seemed to them I was giving up a lot of opportunities and so on. It didn't seem odd to me. It was what I wanted to do.

F: Did you feel a responsibility to the province?

M: Oh yes, one part of Manitoba yes, as a community. Mind you, to be realistic about coming back, it was the only place I got a job. This was in '35 you see, amidst the Great Depression and jobs were exceedingly hard to get. At least as

hard to get as they are now in academic life.

F: You devoted much time to the Manitoba Historical Society over the next 25 years. Why?

M: Well, the Society would do what I was trying to do myself and therefore I had a professional interest in it. Secondly, I have always held as an academic historian that history is a social enterprise and is to be encouraged as such. As Trevelyan said, men will always make up their own history and it is therefore the duty of the scholar to try to see they make as good history as they can. Also I was very much influenced by two men: one was R. O. MacFarlane, whom I've already mentioned, and who tried, too, to revive the Historical Society. The other was J. L. Johnston, the Provincial Librarian, who was almost grief-stricken that the society had ceased to function and thought it very important for the province that it be revived and made active again. I attribute the revival that did eventually take place in the '40s more to Johnston than to anyone else.

F: What are historians' responsibilities to their community?

M: Well, a historian's first responsibility, of course, is to his craft, his science, and he may not feel he has any to his community. I think he may properly feel that such a sense of obligation is in fact a detriment. My own view was different. I think the historian functions best as a conscious member of the community. He may be a stern mentor if he has that particular temperament and outlook. He may tell people what he thinks they ought to do and, you know, a historian like Donald Creighton will always be listened to when he takes that role. But my own feeling was--it's a job of increasing historical consciousness and informing it well. That, I think, is the commitment to the community that the historian--if he does undertake one--should undertake.

F: What is your own role in public life?

M: Well, in a sense I'm not conscious of ever having had one. I've always been very much the academic scholar nor have I said very much publicly. I've always felt free to, when I felt that I had anything to say, and occasionally I have written to the newspapers or spoken out.

F: Did you ever think of running for public office?

M: No. Well I suppose I thought of it but I never thought of it seriously.

F: Why?

M: Well, you see, I could have done it because I was a very successful university politician and I think I shied away from that because I felt it would lead me astray and I think it would have exhausted me. Public life takes things out of one and in a way of which I am sufficiently conscious to make me charitable towards public men. The constant demands, the draining out of energy--I don't know how they endure what they do. I suppose I was afraid of it. I shied away from it in any case. I made a deliberate choice not to pursue that line. The nearest I came to it was in journalism, you see, and I decided against that too.

F: But your talents might have fitted you for public life. Did you think in those terms?

M: I suppose I did in a way but then I thought I was serving the country by being a historian--as I think I did. I don't think there's anything incompatible for the historian being a public figure as a historian. That's a well-established tradition in Canada. A.R.M. Lower and Donald Creighton were public figures as well as great historians. And I even carry that to the point of saying that a historian may be, as I have been myself, a declared partisan in politics. I think it is quite

the operating room--he didn't like the dissecting room. He just walked out and never went back, something I think which grieved him in a way because he was always too modest about his education. I am quite sure he could have been Premier had he cared to assert himself at a later date, but he wasn't sure that he had the training for that kind of job and he let a man, Doug Campbell, (who in his own way was very gifted of course, and made a first rate Premier), have a job that he might have had himself.

F: He gave up medicine then but did not suggest that that would be the right tack for you to take?

M: No, there was no suggestion of any kind.

F: Did you consider at that point, say first or second year of college, what direction your career might take?

M: I don't remember any goal at all; I just wanted to go to university and take Arts.

F: Did you think in terms of divinity?

M: I did at one time at St. John's, yes, one was under considerable influence there--no pressure but influence. Most of my friends were what we called theologs, you see.

F: So you considered this?

M: Oh yes.

F: But chose not to. Why?

M: I think I was only playing with it and I don't suppose I would have gone on with it anyway because I didn't think I was quite that kind of person but this was one point at which my father did intervene. He was horrified and very stern about it. It made me stop and think.

F: And what happened?

M: I just went on to take my degree in Arts.

F: You won a Rhodes scholarship at the University of Manitoba for 1932. Had you thought in terms of winning that scholarship in the year coming up to it?

M: Oh no, never dreamt of it.

F: But you were active in the student council. Did you play university sports as well?

M: I played college football and I raced.

F: What kind of running?

M: Half mile and mile.

F: What about football; what position did you play?

M: I played left inside, forward.

F: Did you enjoy that kind of thing?

M: Oh yes, yes.

F: And social life on campus, what was that like?

M: Well, in my first two years it was all at St. John's really, and that was very quiet. There were dinners and dances occasionally and there was a very intense life among the students within the college which was social but not, I think, in the sense you intend. There wasn't very much actually but when I got to the university there were bigger, more frequent and gaudier things to attend and I very much enjoyed them.

F: You were editor of the paper?

M: I edited the *Manitoban* in '30-31.

F: Was that an enjoyable experience?

M: Oh I had a wonderful time. Indeed, I thought of journalism at that time.

F: You then went to Oxford. What impact did those years have on your career?

M: Well, two things happened: throughout my four years in the general course I thought my principal interest was in

possible to separate the two roles, the role of objective scholar and the role of a declared partisan. So at one time I did some work for the Conservative Party which I joined in 1947 after the spy trial which I thought was shockingly handled.[7] Therefore I thought that if this tradition was to have any hope of survival it would be best done--most likely to happen--through the Conservative Party. I may have been quite wrong but I was thinking in terms of the British tradition of fair trial and all that sort of thing. So I did do some work and speak out and I wrote a few articles trying to clarify what I thought. I actually did some political writing and even some political work. I was very keen on it at one time and in a sense I still am. I decided it was very important for Canada to have an active and occasionally at least successful Conservative party. My reason for thinking so was that I thought the Conservative party had something to offer that no other party had. Namely, it is not a class party, it's a party of the whole community. And that means you can't have a simple reactionary Conservative Party. Above all you can't have a Conservative Party that is really a 19th century liberal party which is what the NDP and the Liberals say the Conservative Party is. It can be a very progressive humanitarian party and, indeed, if it's to have any success, as well as if it's to live at peace with itself, it has to be just those things. It's conservative in the sense that while it accepts change now, it firmly believes that you should never do anything for the first time and whatever you do you should do it slowly, more or less when driven to it, but not just for the sake of change. If the old will work at all, for heaven's sake, stay with the old because heaven knows what the new will do.

F: What was your goal when you founded University College at the University of Manitoba in 1963?

Morton at University of Manitoba, University College Christmas dinner 1964 (Provincial Archives of Manitoba N12829)

M: In the late '50s when we all saw that there was to be enormous University growth, (even the least projection was enormous and actually the highest wasn't great enough) we were all thinking about the nature of the University and how it should be led in its enforced growth. I took up the college idea. That, of course, was natural to me, because I had been a college man, both here and at Oxford, but I attempted to rationalize a personal preference. I argue that in University, and particularly in the large Arts and Sciences faculties, students need opportunities to meet one another and to meet their instructors. Well, when classes get large and faculties get very large, these opportunities diminish. What do you do? Well my answer is, you subdivide, and the obvious and traditional way of subdividing is to organize colleges. It was as simple as that. I was very much influenced by an article published by Tom Symons and Watt of Queen's, now principal of Queen's, on the subject of colleges. It helped me think perhaps the thing was feasible--even in this country, even in this century--so when we began talking about a new Arts building, George Broderson of St. John's and I said: 'Well, why just the building? Why not a building in which

there would be a college? And that's where it came from.

F: What about the ideal? St. John's is Anglican; St. Paul's is Roman Catholic. What was your concept of a unity or a heart to University College?

M: Well, I think it had be brought about simply by "selling," to use that hateful term, simply disseminating the idea of a college. The college doesn't have to be denominational, the college has to be a fellowship, and that comes about by doing certain things together. It's very important to have as much residence as you can; it's very important to have a dining hall, where there is a daily meeting; and it's important to do things as a college. There's a great many things that can be done outside the curriculum which are still helpful to the life of a university and even to the way one deals with the curriculum. Well, we went at it that way and for two years we had a great deal of success. It was a great deal of work. These things had to be worked at.

F: I don't know if it failed or whether you want to go into its record.

M: I think it had to come down from the heights on which it was. There was a tremendous impetus, largely from the students, when the College was launched. Well, that obviously would come into the light of common day and all that sort of thing. So I'm not prepared to be critical, to say that the college is not now as it was once nor do I wish to say anything further.

F: You left Manitoba to go to Trent University (Peterborough, Ontario) in 1966 and I assume a similar kind of experiment, is that true?

M: Oh yes.

F: Did you have a hand in the founding of Trent?

M: No, it had been going two years before I got there but I had been in touch all along.

F: It would have accorded with the kind of college ideal that you had in mind at UC.

M: Oh very much, more so, you see, because in addition to the college as such there was the tutorial system, "small group instruction" as we called it to avoid these hateful Oxford terms. It had extraordinary success, you see, in the scholarships won and all that sort of thing. Trent, which is the smallest university in Ontario, is up there with the big fellows. It's a good, first-degree university.

F: Did you yourself handle tutorials?

M: Oh yes.

F: Did you enjoy it?

M: Oh yes, it's the only way to teach. Incidentally, I also had to give lectures, which have their place but the real teaching experience is the tutorial one, I think.

F: Do you enjoy lecturing?

M: I can, though, I think like everybody, a long course of lectures can become a bit humdrum or at least one can.

F: Are there things you have not done which you would have liked to do in your career?

M: It seems both arrogant and smug to say no but I honestly can't think of anything. I suppose what has really happened is that my ambitions have narrowed over the years and I'm complacently rounding off what I regard as a well-finished life.

F: But you are still writing and working at what seems to me to be a furious pace.

M: In my own line, yes.

F: Do you think of the Donald Smith biography which you are now writing[8] as

fitting into a corpus of historical work that you have consciously designed?

M: No, that's my basic trouble. My work really came to an end with *The Critical Years* because that started out to be a book about the place of the West in Confederation.[9] When the Centenary series came up I simply reshaped it somewhat to make it fit in. It didn't quite come off; I meant it to crown my work and it has been a rather disappointing book. I don't understand why because I think I did what I set out to do, to show how Confederation was possible only because the larger scheme was followed and these outlying places like the Maritimes and the West were brought in to resolve the conflict between Upper and Lower Canada, between the French and the English. So anything I have done since has been just done for itself and not as part of an architectural scheme. The biography of Donald A. Smith is in that position.

F: When did you first think in terms of a larger design for your writing?

M: I think it began to take shape--the design of having so much work and then calling it complete--when I was working on *Manitoba*.[10]

F: That would be in the early 1950s?

M: Yes.

F: Now how did you see "Clio in Canada" when you were writing it?[11]

M: ....I suppose that was part of my preparation for working seriously in Western History and trying to make it a significant part of Canadian History.

F: Had you already at that point contracted to do the *Progressive Party*?[12]

M: Oh yes, some time before then. You see, the Progressive Party came out in 1950 if I remember.

F: That's right, and so you were well at work at it?

M: From 1944 on.

F: When did you decide to write the history of Manitoba?

M: I didn't decide--I was asked by George Brown to do it.[13] That really touched off the line of development that we've been talking about.

F: When was that?

M: I would say about 1950. He had a design for a set of provincial histories. Mine was the only one that ever got written as part of that design.

F: Does the *Canadian Identity* fit into this same development of your thought?[14]

M: Yes, that's right. It's out of the same line of thought. Again it was something I was asked to do--because my interests were known by that time I was asked to do it. In many ways it was an offshoot of my being at the University of Wisconsin for a semester as the Paul Knaplund lecturer. But it was an offshoot really of what I was doing along the lines we have been discussing. I'd written my Presidential Address, you see, in which I summed up what I thought about Canadian historical writing.[15] Then I went to Wisconsin as they said in the letter "to lecture." Well, I thought that meant giving lectures to students. Actually it meant giving free public university lectures so I had to rally round and do some late work to present these. They liked them and decided to publish them provided I could round them out a bit so I included the Presidential Address with permission from the Canadian Historical Association. Then when I was over in England I suddenly got a cable from them saying, "what shall we call this book?" I pulled the rather silly term "The Canadian Identity" out of the air and sent it back. It wasn't thought out.

F: Did your perception of Canada change in the late 1940s?

M: I think in a sense that is true. There was a difference of perception between how I saw the country in the '40s and how I saw it in the '50s. I was an actual separatist in the '20s, you know, a Western Separatist; feeling was very strong down to 1936 and I suppose I just stayed in that position. Then things got very trying indeed because of the Depression and because of Mitch Hepburn in Ontario who was outrageous, you know, a selfish, arrogant, mean individual. so it all lead up to "Clio in Canada." But in many ways that was a carry-over. I had actually changed when the federal-provincial income redistribution was introduced. That seemed, to me, to alter the whole picture. I made a great deal of it and I began to become less a regionalist and more a nationalist.

F: So that really happened in the '40s?

M: It happened after '47.

F: Do you regard certain achievements with partieular satisfaetion?

M: I look back with some satisfaction on certain things. One was I think the *Progressive Party in Canada* signaled the beginning of serious scholarly or professional Western History. I don't quite know why that's so, because George Stanley's book was really the landmark, but I felt my book somehow or other--perhaps because of the time--made a difference that *The Birth of Western Canada* (1936) hadn't done. That's a matter of opinion. So I look back on that with satisfaction. Then I take great satisfaetion in the *Manitoba*, whieh I think is a good book; it's a well written book. And I like to see the way my work shaped up. I think it has a body, a coherence, that is satisfying. Apart from that, I take great pride in what I did at University College and at Trent, and I think while perhaps it was a typically conservative reaction–you know a blow in the face of reality and all the rest of it--and it obviously won't transform university life, I still think it had a good effect and I think Trent University bears that out. Not that I was the only one at Trent, of course, we were a band of brothers there.

F: Were you partieularly pleased by some of the recognitions and awards you have received?

M: Yes, I was very struck by the recognition of my work in thc late '50s. The award of the Tyrrell Medal for this rather offbeat history I had been doing touched me very much. After all, I had been rather rude to some of my Canadian brethren in a professional sense and they took it in good part. Election to the Royal Society of Canada, I felt it the same way. I was gratified in a rather larger sense by being made a member of the Royal Society of History in England. That was a recognition that I wasn't just a regionalist--not just a nationalist--but was accepted as a historian. I had read them a paper some time before. One very special thing, though it is not quite on the same scale, it has always been a great source of pride to me, of course, was the Morton Medal at the University of Manitoba. They have been very careful in awarding it so that I think it is something quite significant.[16]

The Order of Canada is, of course, an honour, but you get into competition there. I regretted that I was made a member at that time because I got what I was worth at that time, an offieership, but Creighton and Lower are Companions.

F: How would you describe Manitoba to a newcomer?

M: Well, when I did this, I happened to be a member of the Lower Fort Garry Motor Country Club--an honorary

member--I only used to take distinguished visitors down there. I took them to Lower Fort Garry and I would still do that because it's eyewitness to another age and another period in history, it shows how long a history we have in spite of being a new province and indeed from there you can work your way baek to Captain Button and all the rest of it. And then, from there too, you go straight-way to the Red River Settlement which I think was a real historical background for this provinee although the province became so different from the Red River Settlement. That leads on to the 1870 business and the French community in Manitoba.[17] Then, of course, the other thing you are faced with right away, from the moment of arrival, is the fact of the city of Winnipeg; and I think perhaps the most significant tbing about Manitoba at the moment is that over half its population is in this one great urban aggregation and so you have city built for regional purposes acting as the capital of what is, in terms of population and wealth, a relatively small province.[18] I think that you can talk about all those things without being too boring.

W.L. Morton
(Provincial Archives of Manitoba N12831)

F: You spoke in *Manitoba* of a "superficial friendliness" that was to be found amongst the ethnic groups in the province.

M: Well I suspect, though of course I'm becoming detached, that it has improved over that. I think there I was reflecting the attitude of my own kind of Manitoban, a member of the majority group who had to be decent about it all, whereas now I think there is a genuine quality to the diversity of people. I sense this in what I read about Folklorama and so on. But as always, I shrink from the term "melting pot." I think we blended without melting--which was what we intended to do. The British inheritance is basic to all English speaking Canada and in great part to French speaking Canada too. This is why we can use, though it is not wise to, the term "founding races." The French and English brought in our languages and our institutions and they were founders in the sense that no-one else can be though that is not to depreciate what other people are and have done, it's just a historical fact.

F: Is Manitoba very different from the other prairie provinces?

M: Yes, both Saskatchewan and Alberta of course. For one reason, you see, there's a whole generation of historical development before those provinees came into being and Manitoba had to live with the consequenees of 1870 down to 1916. The School Question, you see, wasn't settled even then but it was brought to a culmination by the school aet of 1916.[19] Saskatchewan and Alberta hadn't very mueh of that experienee.

F: Are you optimistie about the immediate future of the province?

M: I am. I'm sorry that we seem both in Manitoba and in Winnipeg to have got into the old Canadian habit of running ourselves down. I think we have a

remarkable society and basically a happy one. And I think that we are a prosperous community and I think we will go on being prosperous. We may not be as prosperous as Alberta but it is a simple fact that there are no fuel oil formations in Manitoba. Winnipeg is a very livable place. And, of course, now with the roads and cars, all Manitobans share in Winnipeg's life.

ENDNOTES

[1]W.L. Morton "On Seeing an Unliterary Landscape" *Mosaic* III (3) 1970. Morton's shorter writings have been made more accessible by the publication of A.B. McKillop ed. *Contexts of Canada's Past: Selected Essays of W.L. Morton* (Toronto 1980). The most complete discussion of his historical thought is in Carl Berger *The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English - Canadian Historical Writing 1900 to 1970* (Toronto 1976).

[2]Gladstone, Manitoba, is a farming village 90 miles northwest of Winnipeg. It was founded in 1871-1872. Morton discusses his early years in a charming memoir, "Furrow's End," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 21, 3 (1986) 3-31.

[3]"Bluff" usually denotes a steep cliff or headland but on the Canadian prairies the term denotes a grove of trees.

[4]Anglican: The Church of England in Canada was officially renamed the Anglican Church of Canada in 1955.

[5]The context is provided by Morton's history of the district: W.L. Morton and Margaret Morton Fahrni *Third Crossing: A History of the First Quarter-Century of the Town and District of Gladstone in the Province of Manitoba* (Winnipeg 1946).

[6]The University of Manitoba was established in 1878. One of its founding institutions was St. John's College, a Church of England school that first opened in 1849 and was reestablished in 1866. W.L. Morton *One University: A History of the University of Manitoba* (Toronto 1957).

[7]The "Gouzenko affair" broke in Ottawa in 1945. A cipher clerk at the Soviet Embassy, Igor Gouzenko, had defected and claimed that his former employers were operating an espionage network in Canada. Twelve suspects were interrogated before a Royal Commission in 1946. A number were subsequently tried and convicted.

[8]Morton finished a draft of one volume of this biography of Donald Smith (Lord Strathcona and Mount Royal) but it was never published.

[9]W.L. Morton *The Critical Years: The Union of British North America 1857-73* (Toronto 1964).

[10]W.L. Morton *Manitoba: A History* (Toronto 1957).

[11]W.L. Morton "Clio in Canada: The Interpretation of Canadian History" *University of Toronto Quarterly* April 1946; this article reviews some themes in Canadian history and asserts that the development of a western Canadian community should be included as a significant aspect of the national story.

[12]W.L. Morton *The Progressive Party in Canada* (Toronto 1950) examines that "farmers' revolt" of 1919-26.

[13]Brown was an historian and also editor at the University of Toronto Press.

[14]W.L. Morton *The Canadian Identity* (Madison 1961).

[15]W.L. Morton "The Relevance of Canadian History" *Report of the Historical Association* 1960.

[16]The W.L. Morton Gold Medal is awarded annually to the outstanding graduate of the Master of Arts programme at the University of Manitoba.

[17]Manitoba entered the Canadian Confederation in 1870 after an armed resistance led by French-speaking, mixed-race (metis) inhabitants of the Red River Settlement.

[18]Winnipeg remains the largest city in the eastern prairies and has over 600,000 inhabitants in 1990.

[19]This issue involved the rights of non-English citizens to education in their own language. These rights were abrogated, after many years of official status, in 1916. Francophone rights were of a different character and, though abolished with the others in 1916, the use of French as a language of instruction in schools was continued under the table and eventually was sanctioned by the provincial government. The official use of French in government institutions was abolished by provincial statute in 1890 but was held to be legally valid in court cases in the 1970s and was then restored.