

**“Haunted Memories and Search for Identity in Michael Ignatieff’s “The Russian Album”
and “True Patriot Love,” by Romanov Konstantin, Ph.D.**

Canadian historian and politician Michael Ignatieff descends from Russian nobles and Scottish aristocrats who immigrated to Canada in the beginning of the nineteenth century. His two books *The Russian Album, 1987* and *True Patriot Love, 2009* retell the story of several generations of his family who lived in Russia and Canada in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This article analyses haunted stories from the past that impacted the formation of the authors’ personality and social views.

Key words: identity, Canada, immigration, emigration, Russian Revolution.

Michael Ignatieff, former leader of the Liberal party of Canada, is known as an author, academic and politician. Descendant of two noble families – Scottish and Russian – Ignatieff, in his books, reflects on his familial past in the nineteenth and twentieth century Canada, Britain and Russia. Most of the family members portrayed in *The Russian Album, 1987* and *True Patriot Love, 2009*, were heavily involved in political life of Canada and Russia, which makes their memories and reflections a significant part of national histories. The author tries to rediscover his origins by recreating a true “documentary” story of family; and reconcile haunted periods and events of the past. Ignatieff mentioned in several interviews that family history has always reinforced and enriched his own sense of identity.

Social disasters, such as revolutions, repressions, genocide, wars and expatriation were the major landmarks of the twentieth century. Wars and conflicts, capitalist imperial expansion, industrialization of the West and Bolshevik revolution in Russia caused mass migration. Historical collisions of the nineteenth to early twentieth century have had tremendous impacts on both of Ignatieff’s families. In both *The Russian Album, 1987* and *True Patriot Love, 2009*, Ignatieff conveys the message that emigration has become one of the major phenomena of the

twentieth century. Or more precisely, “a normal condition of existence.”¹ He goes on to say, “This century has made migration, expatriation and exile the norm, rootedness the exception”². Immigration is one of the main burdens in both books, but the two families had quite different reasons to leave their countries: Grant’s most likely immigrated to Canada for financial reasons; the Ignatieffs left Russia after the Revolution under threat of political persecution. Emigration, Ignatieff argues, always has a dual effect – it destroys a person’s connection to previous generations, but at the same time it reinforces memory. The first chapter of *The Russian Album* is called “The Broken Path” – that demonstrates the loss of connection between the author and his predecessors. Although the connection with the past is lost, a persons’ need for identity demands attempting to recreate the connection to the past generations and land that has been lost. Quoted in an interview for CBC in 1987 he said, “The book is an attempt to reach out to the two people I never knew.”

A major theme that haunts both families are military conflicts. The attitudes that family members express towards wars are quite different and often undergo changes. “His first thought was to enlist,”³ says the author about the reaction of his grandfather, William Grant, when he heard the news that World War I had broken out. As an advocate of the British Empire he welcomed militarization of Britain and joined up to “vindicate our character as a fighting race.”⁴ Loyalty to the Empire was a main attribute of Canadian identity at the time: “the Grants and Parkins believed that loyalty to empire was at the core of being Canadian.”⁵ Horrors of war that

¹ *The Russian Album*, p.1.

² *The Russian Album*, p.1.

³ *True Patriot Love*, p. 88

⁴ *True Patriot Love*, p. 89

⁵ *True Patriot Love*, p. 93.

“the middle-aged professor,” as he often called his ancestor, saw in France have heavily impacted his attitude towards war. To quote, “Dearest, I yearn for you so, and for the babies and for peace and to cut the grass; and all the little homely things of home.”⁶

The attitude to war becomes more balanced. –Patriot William Grant, accepted the war as an important event in building the nation, but he also opposed violence. Canadians, he argued, entered World War I as loyal colonials. After the war, a new identity was born with Canada securing the right to conduct independent foreign policy. William Grant realized that this identity had a high price. His career was devoted to commemorating the fallen. He distanced himself from imperial beliefs and later, in the 1920s, his perception of war has become more critical. “We honour the fallen men... But let that not lead us to glory war” he said in one of his late speeches.⁷ His son George Parkin Grant later says about this ambiguity: “he was haunted by the war but the war was also the making of him.”⁸

In *The Russian Album*, World War I is overshadowed by the Revolution, but the War is not neglected. World War I is mainly associated with the weakness of the monarchy and the state. “As the western front collapsed ... the War Minister told his colleagues: “I rely on impassable spaces, on impenetrable mud and on the mercy of St Nicolas.”⁹ Portrayed in the book as a disaster for the country, World War I directly affected the authors’ family when Paul’s sister Katia, who served as a nurse in a hospital train, contracted an infection and died.

⁶ *True Patriot Love*, p. 96.

⁷ *True Patriot Love*, p. 109.

⁸ *True Patriot Love*, p. 111.

⁹ *The Russian Album*, 1987, p. 97.

The Revolution that followed the imperial war is the major military theme of *The Russian Album*. Described from the viewpoint of a noble, Ignatieffs' family who supported the monarchy, the Bolshevik Revolution is presented as a national disaster as well. It brought dramatic changes to society and highly influenced personalities of Ignatieff family members. Paul Ignatieff, the authors' grandfather, previously involved in politics had become ignorant to social life. His wife Natasha "was no longer the frail, vague, comical and retiring figure of their childhood in Petrograd. Hardship had weathered her."¹⁰ The Revolution, forever changed the course of Russian history, but for the author's family brought an end the connection between his family and their homeland.

World War II brought controversies to the Grant family. George Grant, the authors' uncle, unlike other family members who favoured the war, expressed a strong anti-military attitude and criticized the European and Americans role in it. "After the war ... Europe would have to realize that it was not heaven-endowed to run the world."¹¹ The rapid growth of military technology that achieved its climax in the "technological evil of Hiroshima"¹² forever turned Grant's mind away from American imperialism. He idealistically dreamt of Canada as a peaceful alternative to America and Soviet Russia, which he later developed in his academic writing, was largely nourished on his wartime experiences. He believed that the war-wounded world should return to rural community life and deep faith in order to overcome the negative effects of the War(s).

Another important theme that dominates both *novels* is the involvement of both families in Canadian national history. For example, *True Patriot Love* narrates major trends and events in

¹⁰ *The Russian Album*, 1987, p. 136.

¹¹ *True Patriot Love*, p. 130.

¹² *True Patriot Love*, p. 131.

Canadian history as seen through the eyes of the Grant family. All four generations portrayed in the novel mirror the main landmarks of the state development through late 19th and the first half of the twentieth century. Trying to be objective and avoid partiality, the author makes an important argument: “Our Canada ... was not the Canada of the French, the Aboriginals or the new immigrants.”¹³

George Monro Grant, who represents the first generation of the family born in Canada, is passionate about the idea of the new union of ex-British colonies. In 1872 he makes the journey from ocean to ocean across pre-CPR Canada. While travelling across the wilderness he meets Aboriginal and French-speaking Métis people. He makes an important determination, “the alluring vision of a homogeneous and united people sometimes tempts Canadians, but they must never forget that a people can be truly united only when great minorities do not feel themselves treated with injustice.”¹⁴ Having experienced travelling across the country, he tries to find the practical application of the theoretical concept of unity through diversity that would later be embedded in the Multicultural Act.

The authors’ uncle George Grant, who wrote *Lament for a Nation*, expresses anxiety over the growing influence of the United States on Canada and the post-war era. Concerned about the future of Canada in the world, he became one of the ideologists of Canadian cultural protectionism, the dominant trend in Canadian intellectual life in the 1960s. Lamenting Canadian nationalism he regretted the loss of conservative traditions and rejected liberalism that he associated with the American imperialism.

¹³ *True Patriot Love*, p. 23.

¹⁴ *True Patriot Love*, p. 61.

Involvement in public life is also presented in *The Russian Album*. As previously mentioned, the Ignatieff family supported the Russian monarchy because of their aristocratic heritage. Pavel Ignatieff, representative of the first generation depicted in the novel, chose a military career in the early 1820s. He was a “sturdy and unquestioning bulwark of autocracy.”¹⁵ His son Nicholas had chosen a diplomatic career. As a young diplomat he was missioned to negotiate imperial borders with China. He gained renown as a skillful diplomat and, later in his career as the ambassador to the Ottoman Empire he won the nickname “the master of all Balkan intrigues.”¹⁶ “The Balkan question” was one of the main Russian imperial issues in the nineteenth century.

Born in Constantinople in 1870 Nickolas’ son and, the authors’ grandfather Paul built his professional career in St Petersburg as a Minister of Education in the tsarist government. In the early twentieth century, as the Russian monarchy was losing popular support, the family stayed faithful to the old rule. The author depicts rapid degradation of power and state in the first and second decade of the twentieth century, which haunted the Ignatieff family.

Large spaces are common attributes of both Canada and Russia. In *The Russian Album* and in *True Patriot Love* the author shows giant geographies of both countries. The motive of a journey, a common literary device, is the major method that is used to portray the scope of both countries. Thus the author bonds together the space, land, landscape and people. The idea of territorial expansion and frontier, fundamental for American culture, is also present in Canada and Russia of the nineteenth century.

The epic transcontinental journey of George Monro Grant started in the summer of 1872 in Halifax and ended in October 1872 in Victoria. His voyage from ocean to ocean symbolizes

¹⁵ *The Russian Album*, p. 42.

¹⁶ *The Russian Album*, p. 47.

Canada's drive to the West and the growing demand of statehood and unity. On his way to the West, George Monro Grant saw challenges and complications on the way of the new Dominion.

The first journey depicted in *The Russian Album* is Nicholas Ignatieff heading east of Russia, to Asia, as part of a tsarist envoy. The author introduces the eastern roots of the Russian civilization to the narrative. "Ignatieff sat cross-legged on the carpets of the Emir, drinking tea, exchanging gifts, and learning the patience and ruthlessness of the hosts. There seemed some affinity between the Russian envoy and the Asian prince, some Tatar filiation in the hooded eyes, black moustaches, and the mixture of bravery and cunning."¹⁷ Yet the author himself prefers the European side in the old dilemma of western and eastern roots of Russia. "Natasha spoke and thought in German and English; her dentist was an American who lived in Dresden; she bought her lingerie in Nice ... Paul was raised by French tutors and grew up speaking and thinking in French ... They travelled across an open frontier to countries whose painting, food and landscape they regarded as their own ... They were the first generation to reconcile their European and their Russian identities, and they were the last."¹⁸

The Revolution pushes the family to take off for a journey-exile to the West. That is the second important journey depicted in *The Russian Album*. Their long journey in exile started in the harbor of Novorossiysk and finally ended in Canada years later. The chapter which describes the family's emigration to England, and subsequently to Canada, is called "Savage Land Afar." The title is ironic: five young offspring of Russian aristocracy sailed to a distant unfamiliar continent to start their careers on the railway and sawmills in Alberta and British Columbia. The

¹⁷ *The Russian Album*, p. 43.

¹⁸ *The Russian Album*, p. 18.

journey also marked a dramatic change in their social roles/positions. They had no illusions about possible return to old ways and embraced a new life in their new country. The parents “had drummed it into the boys that the past was past and they must not end up like so many émigré driving taxis and keeping their bags packed for the return journey to Petersbourg.”¹⁹

Yet the older generation was nostalgic. “Natasha continued to ache for the plenty of Russia, for mushrooms in the autumn, for the carpet of wild flowers in the Doughino meadows, for the piles of succulent dill on the market stalls, for the fields of grain.”²⁰

Despite the fact that *The Russian Album* and *True Patriot Love* were written in an interval of more than twenty years, the analysis reveals similarities in these two books. Ignatieff portrays his familial history in close interface with the major landmarks of Canadian and Russian history. In the narrative, Ignatieff displays haunted periods and events of the past such as the Russian Revolution, the westward expansion of Canada, brutality of World War I and II, and mass migrations of the twentieth century. The historic challenges and collisions of the past coupled with the emigration of the family lead to a constant search for identity and the need to overcome rootlessness. The author argues that in the twenty first century, when the world is faced with disconnection and dislocation due to globalization, people specifically need the sense of belonging. “We have trouble believing in ourselves” – says the author in an interview to CBC. Only telling a genuine personalized story (such as presented in a photo album) may help new generations overcome the shadows of the past and reconciles the haunted history of their country. Reflecting on twentieth century history and the role of his family in it, Ignatieff tries to

¹⁹ *The Russian Album*, p. 158.

²⁰ *The Russian Album*, p. 157.

unsettle the past and proposes a modern version of citizenship: “the citizens share a sense that they know where they came from and know where they are headed in the future” (2009: p. 175).

Works cited:

1. Ignatieff, Michael. *The Russian Album*. New York: Viking, 1987.
2. Ignatieff, Michael. *True Patriot Love: Four Generations in Search of Canada*. Toronto: Viking Group, 2009.