

Biographies of Canadian Prime Ministers

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Fifteen Men: Canada's Prime Ministers From MacDonalld To Trudeau, Gordon Donaldson. Illust. Don Morrison. Doubleday Canada Limited, 1975. 265 pp. \$6.95 hardcover.

Alexander Pope said "The proper study of mankind is man" and in accordance with this belief here is a collection of short biographies of men who have played important roles in Canada. They are indeed men of widely differing personalities and varied accomplishments; their stories are never repetitive, dull or uninteresting. Mr. Donaldson's aim is to try to capture the essential individuality of each prime minister and his success varies chronologically, with the later prime ministers becoming more and more alive as the reader progresses. On trying to assess why I found the latter half of the book more engrossing than the beginning, I wondered if perhaps the difference in reading enjoyment was due to my own familiarity with past political events, bits of half-remembered press releases, and articles about King, Diefenbaker, Pearson and Trudeau. All this had unconsciously filled in the gaps in the necessarily abbreviated careers of these later prime ministers. Few readers would have much additional knowledge about the earlier politicians except that acquired from textbooks.

There is a great deal of politics in *Fifteen Men* which is inevitable and desirable because no prime minister can be known or understood apart from his involvement in the political manoeuvres of his day. Here indeed we are given the raw stuff of history before the textbook historians have edited out all the incidents and quotes which make the politician come alive. The author gives one particularly amusing occurrence which illustrates the moves of an earlier day in an account given by Alexander Galt about his companions (the Fathers of Confederation). While in London negotiating for British approval of confederation, the group went to the Derby suitably attired in topers and tails, with picnic baskets and bottles of champagne. During the carriage ride back to the city they stood on their seats, armed with peashooters, firing at the crowds along the road, George Brown (of the *Globe*) being the most adept. What a wonderful subject for a cartoon!

Mr. Donaldson has interwoven numerous quotations throughout the book which give interesting sidelights on the speaker's viewpoint or character. For example, during the first year of confederation John A. MacDonalld, with "sardonic optimism", wrote "By the exercise of common sense and a limited amount of that patriotism which goes by the name of self-interest, I have no doubt that the union will be for the common weal." Then, in 1877, Laurier, who had just joined the first Liberal cabinet under

Alexander MacKenzie, outlined his political philosophy, "More revolutions have been caused by conservative obstinacy than by liberal exaggeration. . . . Wherever there is compression there will be explosion, violence and ruin. . . . I am a Liberal. I am one of those who think that everywhere in human things there are abuses to be reformed, new horizons to be opened up and new forces to be developed. . . ."

It can become a game to the reader guessing the author's personal opinion of each prime minister as revealed in his descriptive phrases. "MacDonald lurched into the election campaign", and "the old Man was magnificent"; about Alexander MacKenzie, "reluctantly he took the leadership" and "courageously he stood up to the impressive Lord Dufferin when he took it upon himself to meddle in railway politics; of Bowell, "a tiny figure with jagged grey beard and hooded eyes set in a parchment face"; of Tupper, "he roared into his last campaign"; of Laurier, "the courtly gentleman from St. Lin"; of Borden, "the quiet lawyer from Nova Scotia had become a raging lion"; of Arthur Meighen, he says "his gift of words was a weapon which he honed and polished until he could attack the world with it." Mackenzie King "in his revolting, waffling way" obtains a rather grudging respect from Mr. Donaldson who says "he was comfortable and capable. Behind his banner of inspired mediocrity the nation sauntered forward at a surprising rate."

Because the events of Canadian history were influenced by prime ministers, there are very graphic descriptions and explanations of historic events in these biographies. The Riel affair, the Fenian raids, the question of conscription in two world wars, relations between Canada and England, as well as between Canada and the United States—all these are treated at some length.

So much information about Canada's history and her prime ministers is covered in this volume that it repays re-reading. At that time it is possible to spend more time appreciating the lively style of the author and his amusing, sometimes irreverent observations. Mr. Donaldson is not a romantic biographer; he does not gloss over the mistakes, nor does he magnify the merits of his subjects. He seems to be examining them with a quizzical eye and then writing about them with tolerance, good humour, and a soupçon of satire.

The appearance of the book is attractive with a cheerful red dust jacket over denim blue cloth. Included as an appendix is a generous bibliography for the reader whose interest has been aroused; but, most unfortunate, the book has no index. The illustrations consist of portrait sketches appearing at the beginning of each biography; they add little to the enjoyment of the text and perhaps it would have been better to use old political cartoons or contemporary prints.

It has always been considered desirable for children to read biography and there are children who like to know that the characters they are reading about are (or were) real people. Learning about these fifteen men, who have

made our country what it is, will have a lasting impact on any Canadian child. All young people need worthy heroes and models, and these biographies, while they show the prime ministers as human beings with virtues and faults; also indicate those traits which it is desirable to emulate. In the words of the author:

This book is not an attempt to set up graven images, but to survey the adventures of the fifteen lively men who built a nation in defiance of history, geography and climate.

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