

# Biographers and their Subjects

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*Borden: His Life and World*, John English. McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1977. 223 pp. \$17.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-07-082303.

*Robert Borden*, Kathleen Saunders. Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1978. 64 pp. \$2.25 paper. ISBN 0-88902-232-1.

Sir Robert Borden was Prime Minister of Canada at a crucial time, 1911-20: he governed Canada for the entire period of World War I (1914-18). The policies of his government were so important that their effects are still with us in very real ways.

Borden and his colleagues made the historic decision that Canada's commitment to the war effort would be total: Canada became a major partner in the western alliance. From that commitment flowed two drives that were to result in permanent change. The first related to manpower, the primal need of a war machine. By 1917 the volunteer army system was collapsing because men were no longer volunteering in sufficient numbers. The result was the Conscription Crisis of 1917, which left French- and English-speaking Canadians badly divided and completed the destruction of the Conservative party in Quebec. Canada's Tories have never recovered even a fraction of their nineteenth century base in French Canada. The second drive related to the conduct of the war. Canada, with hundreds of thousands of men in Europe, was too big a player to be treated like a minor colony of the British. Borden insisted that Canada's status be taken seriously, and by 1918-19 we were recognized as a sovereign people with separate representation in the League of Nations. Coincidental with these developments occurred the intensifying alienation of farmers and workers, who erupted into third party political action immediately after the war. Thus the Borden years saw fundamental changes in Canada: the two party system was wrecked; the Conservative party was permanently crippled; French Canadians were left hostile and bitter; Canada was an independent nation.

The man who presided over all this change merits the attention that he has been getting in recent years. Borden's memoirs were edited and re-issued in a paperback edition in 1969. His government and its policies received a brilliant analysis in *Canada, 1869-1921: A Nation Transformed* (1974), by R.C. Brown and Ramsay Cook. Brown then

published a two volume life, *Robert Laird Borden: A Biography* (1975 and 1980). The politics of Borden's Conservative party have been illuminated in John English's *The Decline of Politics: The Conservatives and the Party System 1901-1920* (1977). These are works of serious scholarship that tell us much about public life in early twentieth century Canada.

Now we have two new biographies of Robert Borden for the general and/or younger reader. The first, *Borden: His Life and World* (1977), appears in a series on the prime ministers that is edited by W. Kaye Lamb, retired national archivist. This book was written by John English, professor of history at the University of Waterloo. It is lavishly illustrated and well written. Professor English is a leading authority on the subject and introduces us to Sir Robert in a gentle and sensible way. Key issues are well explained for the non-expert, as are both Borden's successes and failures. John English's book can be highly recommended to high school and college students as well as to the general reader. The second, *Robert Borden* (1978), was published in Fitzhenry and Whiteside's large series (*The Canadians*) of very small paperback biographies. Its author, Kathleen Saunders, is a former high school teacher. She has a good command of Borden's period and the relevant literature, and writes well. *Robert Borden* is extensively illustrated and includes marginal comments, questions and summaries. One assumes that this marginalia is designed to assist and instruct the younger reader. However, some comments are far from helpful. For example, in the middle of the discussion of Borden's youth occurs the following: "The Borden's had a good-sized apple orchard. Why was the Annapolis Valley the apple-growing centre of Canada?" (4) This concern with apples is totally unrelated to the text. It causes the reader to ponder the quality of the publisher's editorial staff, but provokes no thinking about Borden or the Conservative party.

These biographies by English and Saunders are worthwhile contributions. However, one wonders about the choice of subject. A solid enough case can be made for studies, popular or otherwise, of any prime minister. At minimum, Canadians should know the names of their leaders, and school libraries should hold a collection that provides a reasonably comprehensive coverage of Canadian history. If a student has occasion to study World War I, conscription, the Conservative party or the development of Canadian autonomy, he can hardly ignore Sir Robert. These books will attract readers at different reading and knowledge levels, and they will certainly provide adequate introduction to Robert Laird Borden. At the same time, it must be conceded that Robert Borden is a very poor subject for biography. He was a dour, humourless man whose actions and comments

encapsulate even the most dramatic crises with a fog of obfuscation. Looking at events through Sir Robert's life does not make history come alive; rather, it makes our past dull and impenetrable. English and Saunders do their best by Borden, but Sir Robert remains a very poor route to Canadian history.

By all means purchase these books and put them in your libraries. Read them and recommend them to those who would know Borden. But, if your objective is to inspire interest in Canada amongst those whose profession is not scholarship, let Sir Robert wait while attention is focussed on dramatic and fascinating personalities like Howe, Mackenzie, Papineau, Woodsworth, Big Bear, McGee, Dumont, Aberhart, Crowfoot and Diefenbaker.

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## Women In Canadian Politics

*RONNIE KENNEDY*

*Women In Canadian Life: Politics*, Jean Cochrane. Fitzhenry & Whiteside Limited, Toronto, 1977. 96 pp. ISBN 0-88902-375-1.

*The Canadians: Emily Murphy*, Donna James. Fitzhenry & Whiteside Limited, Toronto, 1977. 62 pp. ISBN 0-88902-234-8.

*Manitobans In Profile: Edith Rogers*, Gail Konantz. Peguis Publishers Limited, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1981. 52 pp. ISBN 0-919566-76-7.

Canadian women have achieved some fine results in the political arena in the last seventy-odd years, but their achievements have not been widely recognized. All three of the books reviewed here deal with women in politics and two of them do it so well that reading history becomes an adventure in discovery as well as a worthwhile lesson.