

Where Character Meets Circumstance: Political Biography in Modern Canada

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Volume 42, Number 1, Winter/Spring 2013

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad42_1re03

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Publisher(s)

The Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Mackenzie, D. (2013). Where Character Meets Circumstance:: Political Biography in Modern Canada. *Acadiensis*, 42(1), 182–194.

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TRADITIONAL BIOGRAPHY, ESPECIALLY POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY, remains popular for traditional reasons: character and circumstance, context, perspective, and an insider's view of important events in our history. Canadians remain interested in the lives of others, especially those who lived active and eventful lives. It is, indeed, far too early to proclaim "Professional historians have now largely abandoned the full-scale political biography."¹ In fact, recent years have witnessed an explosion in Canadian political biography, from Richard Gwyn's award-winning biography of Sir John A. Macdonald to the Penguin series of biographical sketches. Prime ministers, in particular, have been well served by recent biographies, and they are the focus of the majority of the eight books reviewed here: Carman Miller, *A Knight in Politics: A Biography of Sir Frederick Borden* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010); John Boyko, *Bennett: The Rebel Who Challenged and Changed a Nation* (Fredericton: Goose Lane, 2012); P.B. Waite, *In Search of R.B. Bennett* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012); Allan Levine, *King: William Lyon Mackenzie King, A Life Guided by the Hand of Destiny* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2011); Max and Monique Nemni, *Trudeau Transformed: The Shaping of a Statesman, 1944-1965*, trans. George Tombs (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2011); John English, *Just Watch Me: The Life of Pierre Elliott Trudeau* (New York and Toronto: Knopf, 2009); Paul Litt, *Elusive Destiny: The Political Vocation of John Napier Turner* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011); and Naomi E.S. Griffiths, *The Golden Age of Liberalism: A Portrait of Roméo LeBlanc* (Toronto: Lorimer, 2011).

The traditional pitfalls of political biography remain as well: selectivity, inflation, justification, hero-worship, and the temptation to bend the evidence in favour of the biographer's subject. In the name of context, detractors are rebuffed, gaps in the record filled, mistakes clarified, lapses in judgment explained or excused. The identification between biographer and subject – sometimes clear and pronounced, other times ambiguous and subtle – is almost inescapable. Except in the face of clearly perceived evil, there is always the temptation to see things from the subject's point of view, to turn deficits into assets, to defend against the accusations of others, to rationalize their failings, and, ultimately, to see in the author's hero the possibility of redemption. The task for the reader is to be ever vigilant of that thin line between illuminating political biography and hagiography.

Carman Miller's *A Knight in Politics: A Biography of Sir Frederick Borden* examines the life of one of Canada's longest-serving ministers of militia and a trusted colleague of Sir Wilfrid Laurier. Less well known than his Conservative cousin Robert, Fred Borden was a Liberal with a worldview "that came to

1 Phillip A. Buckner, "Macdonald: A Hero for Our Times?" *The Dorchester Review* 2, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2012): 63. See also Béatrice Craig, "The Art of Biography," *Acadiensis* XL, no. 2 (Summer/Autumn 2011): 146.

encompass region, nation, and empire” (7). He is portrayed as an ambitious, talented, and decisive man who was able to balance family connections, a thriving business career, and political ambitions. Miller eschews the “great man” style of biography in favour of more social history, and what we get is a book that concentrates more on Borden’s public activities than his private life. Most chapters are arranged thematically rather than chronologically, a format that provides a close examination of Borden’s political and administrative activities – but at the cost of character development. Miller’s goal is to assert Borden’s oft-neglected role in the administration, reform, expansion, and professionalization of Canada’s fledgling military, not to delve into the details of his personal life. Nevertheless, the author hints that Borden was an outgoing man, a drinker, and “something of a scamp” (at least according to one reporter) (62).

Miller traces Borden’s early life from his birth in 1847 in a small town in Nova Scotia’s Annapolis Valley through to his local education and, ultimately, to a Harvard medical degree. Borden joined the cadet corps while a student at King’s College in Windsor, and from there began a lifelong connection to the Canadian military. He was attracted to political life for several reasons: a desire to contribute to the development of the nation, the call of public service, and for personal advancement and the opportunity to enhance his private business activities. Borden entered federal politics in 1874 and he stayed, almost without interruption, until his final defeat in 1911. As Laurier’s minister of militia and defence he inherited a department suffering from neglect, and over a period of 15 years he reorganized it, improved the education and training of officers and men, battled generals, politicians, and governors general along the way, and transformed the militia into a more self-sufficient force and one better able to assume responsibility for Canadian defence and security. He also contributed to the creation of a Canadian navy and played a small but helpful role in imperial relations.

Family was central to Fred Borden’s life, and a dense web of family connections transcended his private, business, and political worlds. The lines separating them were never clearly drawn. Similarly, the use of patronage in the awarding of government contracts was always present and served as the glue that held the political world together. But Borden doled out government contracts only to those political friends who offered good prices and a competitive bid, and he defended his actions publicly. He took this responsibility seriously, and in his mind believed that politicians had a duty to protect the public interest. As he told his private secretary, “Public money should be treated as one’s own” (95); it is not clear, though, if he intended the double meaning. Family and patronage also spanned regions, and Miller includes an informative chapter on Borden as a “Maritime Entrepreneur” that traces his evolution from a regional, family-based businessman to a more modern – and national – capitalist. It was not always easy for the aging Borden to adapt to the changes that accompanied industrialization; he was a micro-manager who held on to the old ideas tenaciously. Miller argues that Borden was ultimately successful in this transformation, but is careful not to draw too many larger conclusions about the fate of Maritime industry, entrepreneurship, and regional economic decline. Borden, moreover, gradually adopted a national perspective over a regional one, and Maritime politics and business play a relatively small role in this book. This is a little strange, given Borden’s deep involvement in government patronage; it might be that

throughout his political career he was, in a sense, always the junior minister from Nova Scotia, living and working in the shadow of Laurier's Minister of Finance W.S. Fielding.

Fielding and Borden were ministerial colleagues for 15 years, but Miller does not explore their relationship in any great depth. Other relationships go missing as well – with his cousin Robert and, most importantly, his friendship with Laurier – and political battles in cabinet beg for more attention. During the controversy over the South African War Borden was “chief advocate for an official Canadian contingent” (116), but the crisis is dealt with quickly (perhaps because Miller has covered that material thoroughly elsewhere).² Borden also hoped to focus the new naval construction in Halifax, but the cabinet chose Montreal instead. Miller tells us that Borden “lost his battle” for Halifax (256) but does not fully explain what happened. How hard did he fight? And why did he lose? By not developing these other relationships, the biography presents Borden as even more of a loner than he probably was since for 15 years he worked away in the militia department: mired in administrative duties, doling out patronage, and looking after his family and business interests. By the 1911 election he was “a man out of step with his era,” as he waited in Ottawa for one last patronage appointment as high commissioner to Great Britain. He waited too long for an appointment that never materialized, and returned to his Nova Scotia riding too late to save his seat. He was defeated along with Laurier, the Liberal government's new navy, and reciprocity.

Borden's exit from national politics coincided with the arrival in Ottawa of R.B. Bennett. Once the unknown and unloved prime minister, Bennett has now benefitted from two biographies: John Boyko's *Bennett: The Rebel Who Challenged and Changed a Nation* and P.B. Waite's *In Search of R.B. Bennett*. These books fill a gap in the literature, and both challenge the standard portrayal of Bennett as the wealthy businessman with conventional economic policies who, as prime minister during the Depression, was aloof, oblivious to the plight of the common person, and timid at a time when boldness was needed. It was just a sad twist of fate that Bennett happened to look like the prototype for the cartoon capitalist on *Monopoly's* “Community Chest” cards. Boyko goes the farthest in challenging the stereotype: his Bennett was a “rebel” who “stood against conventional thinking” (26) and saved the country by helping to prevent Canada's slow slide into the dictatorship and extremism that gripped so much of the world during the 1930s.

The outline of Bennett's life is well known: the early years in Hopewell Cape, New Brunswick; his move to the west where he made his fortune in Calgary as a lawyer for the CPR; his entrance into Alberta politics, and then on to Ottawa as an MP; and then as cabinet minister, opposition member, party leader, and, ultimately, prime minister from 1930 to 1935. Following the implosion of Arthur Meighen's government, Bennett was the last man standing from the Conservative remnants of the Union government; he also paid for most of the 1930 Conservative campaign from his own pocket. He subsequently allowed the party organization to atrophy, because he was reluctant to keep on paying for it himself and then was unprepared

2 Carman Miller, *Painting the Map Red: Canada and the South African War, 1899-1902* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993).

for a re-election campaign in 1935. Bennett worked (and ate) himself into a heart attack in March 1935 and from that moment he was a man in slow decline, although it took him a few years to accept it. He retired with no successor poised to replace him, moving to England where he divided his time between a country estate and the House of Lords. He died in 1947 and is buried there, in England, leaving the British to wonder if he was shunned by Canadians or just forgotten. He should be neither, according to Boyko and Waite.

Both authors paint Bennett as smart, talented, generous, hardworking, somewhat puritanical, a loner, and intellectually arrogant. But was he politically astute? He called for national unity and tolerance for Quebec, but opposed bilingual government bank notes and had earlier suggested punishing Quebec if it failed to support conscription. Other than a few individuals, such as his sister and personal secretary, he seems to have gotten along with no one. He could be rude, insensitive, tactless, impatient, intimidating, unforgiving, stubborn, and ruthless, and that was just with his friends. He was also cold and distant with some members of his family, he held lifelong grudges against political opponents (like the Sifton brothers), he dove into huge and bitter disputes with his business partners, he insulted and bullied journalists, and he occasionally turned on and publicly denounced his own colleagues (including two other Conservative leaders, Meighen and Borden). Is it any wonder why, with all his talents, he was not very popular or elected prime minister much earlier? Robert Borden perhaps put it the most succinctly: “Bennett has much ability and great facility of speech but . . . lacks common sense” (Boyko, 108).

Boyko and Waite agree that Bennett was a reformer and a “Red Tory” rather than the more traditional Conservative. While Boyko puts Bennett on the “left” (of both other Conservatives and the Liberals) on the political spectrum, Waite sets his reformism more in the context of the social gospel: the “Tory in Bennett was not just socially progressive but Methodist and bourgeois as well” (15). Waite also includes a regional perspective, adding that Bennett shared with Robert Borden “the same Maritime penchant for reasonable, responsible social legislation” (33). Bennett did speak of himself as a reformer, but it is hard not to see some contradictions in his actions. On the one hand, he had a strong reformist impulse and was progressive enough to make speeches advocating dramatic social change; on the other hand, he followed an economic policy that generally called for retrenchment and a reliance on the free market – a position that ultimately prevented him from taking action on social issues. Bennett’s progressivism also exhibited a strong paternalistic streak – the sense that he had a moral duty to feed and clothe the poor, to provide relief to the needy, and to care for the sick. Consequently, he was incredibly generous in a personal way, handing out thousands of his own dollars to those who approached him for help. But when the working class organized and demanded better pay or working conditions (as in the On-to-Ottawa trek), he acted like a man who hated disorder, generally did not like labour unions, and saw communists at work everywhere.

Both authors address the image of Bennett as a dictator who ran a one-man government, relying on no one but himself. It is a tough image to challenge. Editorial cartoons of the day were very much to the point: one pictured a cabinet meeting with Bennett’s face on all the participants while an Ottawa joke had Bennett strolling on Parliament Hill talking to himself (“Having a cabinet meeting” was the punch line). As for his colleagues, he treated them with neglect if not contempt; this

is reminiscent of Henry Kissinger, who was reported to have treated his staffers as mushrooms (keeping them in the dark, occasionally dumping manure on them, and then having them canned). Both authors admit that there was considerable truth to the argument: Bennett regularly spoke for the government without consulting his cabinet; he interfered in the departments of his cabinet ministers; and for the first years of his government he held four positions: prime minister, minister of finance, secretary of state for external affairs, and president of the Privy Council. Waite explains that Bennett “had to take on much himself” because of the lack of skill and experience of his cabinet and, frankly, because he was talented enough that he could do it (120). But even so, it does leave some lingering questions about his political wisdom and organizational skills.

The Depression was the defining moment of Bennett’s political career, and his legacy will be forever tied to his efforts to deal with it. Ending the Depression was beyond the scope of any Canadian government, but both authors give Bennett some credit for his positive actions and paint the prime minister less as a conservative old-timer, who merely hid his head in the sand and weathered the storm, and more as a pre-Keynesian Keynesian. At the 1932 Imperial Economic Conference we are told that Bennett achieved more than is generally accepted, despite the complaints of the other delegations about his leadership style and fairness. Boyko does a thorough job explaining the issues while Waite is more succinct: Bennett was a protectionist, he writes, who tried to hide it “with high imperial sentiments” (136). But it is the creation of the Bank of Canada, the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission (precursor of the CBC), and the Wheat Board that are highlighted as Bennett’s real accomplishments (all of which were kept and fine-tuned by the Liberals after 1935), and it is here that his legacy can be found. Bennett’s New Deal – a broad reform program of proposed social legislation introduced to Canadians in a series of radio broadcasts in early 1935 – is examined in this context. To correct the stereotypical image of the cold and ruthless “Iron Heel” Bennett, the defender of big business, Boyko suggests that the New Deal was what Bennett had wanted to accomplish all along but that the timing was right only in 1935. Boyko argues his case well, but it is a tough sell not to see an element of desperation in Bennett’s actions. Facing an election and unable to run on his record, he introduced his plans for unemployment insurance, old age pensions, and other progressive ideas and then planned to use them as his platform in the upcoming election campaign. Opposition leader Mackenzie King refused to play ball and called Bennett’s bluff, catching Bennett off-guard. True to form, Bennett had not bothered to meet or discuss it with his cabinet before embarking on his radical reform program, and much of the legislation was unprepared while other parts were ultimately declared unconstitutional.

Boyko’s book is more popular in style and it moves along briskly. He consistently references modern events and compares them to Bennett’s actions in the 1930s. The Oka crisis, Meech Lake, Jean Chrétien, the Free Trade Agreement, and more are alluded to in an effort to help us better relate to the issues facing Bennett and his government. Pierre Trudeau, for example, has 17 entries in the index. Some readers might find this method of comparison illuminating; others might find it irritating. As might be expected from one of Canada’s pre-eminent scholars, Waite’s book is more academic and rooted in primary sources (with some 40 pages of endnotes). At the same time, Waite is reflective, informal, thoughtful, and wise. One early chapter

gives a sweeping view of late-1920s Canada that is nostalgic in tone; this chapter, which is partially entitled “RB’s Canada,” could just as easily be named “PB’s Canada.” Waite is sympathetic to Bennett but is less Bennett’s champion than Boyko, and it is interesting to compare the differing portrayals of the relationship between Bennett and Mackenzie King. Boyko has King spewing venom on Bennett; Waite portrays a much more civil relationship, with the two political opponents talking and meeting with each other frequently. Neither author devotes much attention to the Maritimes, which is more surprising in Waite’s case given that he spent his career at Dalhousie University and should be the more sensitive to Bennett’s “Maritime heritage.” Perhaps it just is not there, for once Bennett left for Calgary he became more a westerner than a Maritimer. He returned “home” annually for holidays until his mother died, and then his visits became increasingly rare. In retirement he manifested a love for the Maritimes and his New Brunswick home, and he gave generously to Maritime projects (especially to universities); but during his years in politics in Alberta and Ottawa, his Maritime roots just did not show. Like his boyhood friend Max Aitken, he never moved home. Nevertheless, these two books have done a service for Canadian political history and in particular have set Bennett’s political career on a much more solid foundation.

If Bennett was an unknown character in search of a biographer, Mackenzie King has had no such troubles. It is hard to imagine anything new that a biographer might offer; King’s diaries are now online and the official record is voluminous if a bit of a patchwork quilt, with three volumes by two authors bringing the story up to 1939, the four-volume *Mackenzie King Record*, and the work of J.L. Granatstein, C.P. Stacey, and many others.³ A solid single-volume biography, however, is long overdue and Allan Levine has combined his academic training and excellent writing skills to produce *King: William Lyon Mackenzie King, A Life Guided by the Hand of Destiny*, a welcome addition to the literature. Levine admits that King is a hard nut to crack, but gets right to the psychoanalysis: King’s “list of weirdness is a long one” (3), he writes, and the former prime minister was a “textbook example of an insecure passive-aggressive male” with “obsessive-compulsive tendencies” (10). Contrary to Stacey’s earlier argument that the one half of King’s double life had relatively little influence on the other, Levine states that we must consider both the private and public Kings together: as he puts it, the “whole crazy package” (14). Much attention is given to King’s love life and to his dogs, and we squirm in our seats as we read

3 See R. MacGregor Dawson, *William Lyon Mackenzie King: A Political Biography, Volume One, 1874-1923* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1958); H. Blair Neatby, *William Lyon Mackenzie King, 1924-1932, Volume Two: The Lonely Heights* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963); H. Blair Neatby, *William Lyon Mackenzie King, 1932-1939, Volume Three: The Prism of Unity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976); J.W. Pickersgill and D.F. Forster, eds., *The Mackenzie King Record*, four vols., 1939-1948 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960-1970); J.L. Granatstein, *Canada’s War: The Politics of the Mackenzie King Government, 1939-1945* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1975); C.P. Stacey, *A Very Double Life: The Private World of Mackenzie King* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1976); Henry Ferns and Bernard Ostry, *The Age of Mackenzie King* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1976); Joy E. Esbrey, *Knight of the Holy Spirit: A Study of William Lyon Mackenzie King* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980); and Robert A. Wardhaugh, *Mackenzie King and the Prairie West* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

King's innermost personal and embarrassing diary passages. Levine's King is exasperating, petty, insecure, vain, selfish, intolerant, cautious, talented, and ambitious. Levine covers the familiar ground: King's early years in Berlin, Ontario, his international education, his entry into the civil service and then politics (including the cabinet), his defeat in 1911, the war years in the United States, his return to the Liberal leadership and then the prime minister's office during the 1920s, his defeat in 1930 and revival in 1935, the Second World War, the early Cold War, his retirement, and his death in 1950. He was a very unusual man, and his was an extraordinary career.

Levine astutely examines how King dealt with the Progressive Party in the 1920s and gradually chipped away at its members and their platform; he also gives considerable attention to King's dealings with Quebec and Ontario, and more particularly his relationships with premiers Taschereau, Duplessis, Ferguson, and Hepburn. He does not, somewhat surprisingly, address or even mention the rise of the Maritime Rights movement or the Duncan Royal Commission, and the Maritimes, generally, is absent from his book. Mention is made of the arrival of Nova Scotian J.L. Ralston as minister of defence, and we are told that he "had matters well looked after in the Maritimes" (191). Later, we are reminded that Ralston "had the situation under control in the Maritimes" (221), but again the reference is not fully explained. It is unfortunate that Levine did not take into consideration the work of Ernest Forbes and other Maritime scholars on the role of cabinet ministers as regional representatives and their negative impact on the Maritime economy, especially during the Second World War.⁴

Foreign policy and Canada's evolving place in the world are discussed by Levine, as they are by Miller, Boyko, and Waite. Anglo-Canadian relations was a constant theme in Canadian history during the first half of the 20th century and, despite their vast differences in character, party, and political disposition, all of these politicians seemed to have shared similar views of the relationship – Canada first, with autonomy balanced by membership in the Commonwealth. Fred Borden called it "wise autonomy," a kind of local independence within a united empire; Bennett proclaimed a "Canada first" policy which, aside from the imperial rhetoric, meant a slow evolution to autonomy; and King's "Parliament will decide" version of independence mixed with cooperation with Britain confused just about everybody – but moved in a fairly straight line toward more independence. All three defended Canadian interests against imperial centralizers: Borden with Laurier in 1907 and 1911, Bennett at the Imperial Economic Conference, and King over and over again from 1921 to 1945. You would think from these four books that Canada had a single foreign policy from 1896-1948 and that everything worked out pretty much as was intended.

Like Miller, Boyko, and Waite, Levine utilizes a wide range of sources. But it is King's diary that predominates: it is, Levine writes, "the treasure trove of his triumphs, anxieties, sexual proclivities and chronic guilt, which this book is framed

4 See, for example, Ernest R. Forbes, "Consolidating Disparity: The Maritimes and the Industrialization of Canada during the Second World War," *Acadiensis* XV, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 3-27.

around” (12). The King diary is unquestionably unique, and there is a case to be made that it is the single most valuable primary document for 20th-century Canadian political history. But can you have too much of a good thing? At times the diary seems to lead Levine, rather than the other way round. For example, King’s 1921 election victory morphs into a longer story involving his dog “Pat” and a meeting with neighbour Joan Patteson; the 1935 Italian-Ethiopian Crisis unfolds in the diary as part of King’s romance with a young Italian woman; and later, when the death of Frank Bridges, New Brunswick’s representative in the cabinet, threatened to disrupt the sensitive negotiations with Newfoundland over terms of union, Levine tells us that King placed more importance on the death of little “Pat” than on Bridges. We shake our heads in disbelief over King’s creepy insensitivity and warped sense of priorities, but then Levine adds nothing about why Bridges’s death was important and devotes another full page to King’s moaning over Pat’s demise (384-5). The diary, the séances, the romances, and the obsessive compulsiveness may reveal something of King’s nature and soul, but they do not, on their own, provide a broader understanding of King’s political life.

I think we can now state definitively that we know all we need to know about King’s dogs (although P.B. Waite notes that Bennett coincidentally also called his dog “Pat”). But do we have a better sense of how King’s “weirdness” enabled him to be so successful? If by all accounts King was unpleasant, unpopular, embarrassing, “oily,” and just a few hairs away from being crazy, how did he stay in power for so long? Through all the table rappings, readings of tea leaves, the awkward love letters, the hands of the clock, the dogs, the pettiness, and so on King seems to glide along effortlessly, lucky in his timing and able to weather defeat without any challenge to his leadership. And yet, throughout his life, King demonstrated extraordinary ability over and over again and in many different ways. Thorstein Veblen, the University of Chicago’s renowned political economist, accepted two of King’s articles for publication in the *Journal of Political Economy* while he was still a graduate student. King became deputy minister and then minister of labour while still a young man and he developed close personal relationships – some lasting for decades – with other extraordinary people, from John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to Franklin Roosevelt. After the First World War he resisted the pressures from the Liberal old guard to win and hold the Liberal leadership, and in 1930 he faced electoral disaster and public scandal but lived to build another team of strong and talented ministers (including Ernest Lapointe, C.D. Howe, Ralston, and J.L. Ilsley). He guided the government through the Second World War and, while so many of his colleagues and opponents died, collapsed, or were broken physically and emotionally, he soldiered on to win another election in 1945. During and after the war he assembled and maintained the loyalty of yet another generation of strong and talented cabinet ministers, including Louis St. Laurent, Lester Pearson, Brooke Claxton, Paul Martin Sr., and Douglas Abbott. And, finally, he arranged for his own departure in 1948, groomed his successor, and left a well-funded and organized party that remained in power for another generation. Levine has given us an excellent look into the private mind and character of Mackenzie King, but in many ways King baffles us still.

The career of Pierre Elliott Trudeau also may have its mysterious elements, but less so with the appearance of two new books. Both are second volumes of larger

works: Max and Monique Nemni, *Trudeau Transformed: The Shaping of a Statesman, 1944-1965*, and John English, *Just Watch Me: The Life of Pierre Elliott Trudeau*.⁵ Trudeau's life has been rehashed a dozen times but, in reply to the obvious question as to whether we need two more Trudeau biographies, these new books have the benefit of two things: time and access. First, we have moved some distance away from the events of the Trudeau years and it is now easier for historians to take a broader perspective on his legacy; second, the archival sources for these years are opening and, at the same time, many of the participants are still with us. It might be the best time for a thorough and critical re-examination of Trudeau's life.

The Nemnis continue their investigation of Trudeau's intellectual evolution from his student days to his entrance into politics in 1965. Following the precedent set in volume one, they have painstakingly researched everything they could find written by Trudeau: university essays, journal articles, diary entries, documents prepared as a civil servant in the Privy Council Office – all in an effort to flesh out the development of his political thought, especially regarding federalism. It is a serious academic tome: 450 pages to cover 21 years of intellectual progress, another 50 in notes, a little poetry, and no pictures. What you get is the most thorough examination of Trudeau's philosophical influences, political thought, and intellectual engagement. The focus of his life and of this book is, unsurprisingly, Quebec and its political evolution. Amidst the early rumblings of the Quiet Revolution, Trudeau developed an unshakable commitment to human rights and personal freedom. These rights should never be taken away in the name of collective ideology, and the best way to preserve them was through a multi-national federation and a balance of central and provincial powers. Equally important, as the Nemnis (as well as English) clearly demonstrate, was his argument for the separation of church and state. What is often overlooked or forgotten, especially among readers in English Canada, was the central role in Trudeau's life of the church, his struggle with the clergy, and his deep religious faith. The Nemnis also challenge the traditional view of young Trudeau as a wealthy dilettante who avoided responsibility and flitted from cause to cause. These were not "wasted years" (9), they argue; in fact, Trudeau was preparing himself for office all along. He was driven and methodical in his quest to become a statesman (hence the need for education, travel, and experience); over the years, they write, Trudeau "had patiently and systematically acquired the knowledge needed to exercise statesmanship" (215). Perhaps it was Trudeau's predilection for dashing off impulsively to canoe in the arctic or backpack across Asia that contributed to the stereotypical image. He was able to do those things of which most of us only dream: drop everything and take off for Africa, extend a three-day academic conference into several weeks with side trips to the Middle East or, well, anywhere he fancied. However you look at it, Trudeau was an incredibly active man – as a lawyer, writer, public activist, editor, traveller, and, ultimately, politician.

5 See also Max and Monique Nemni, *Young Trudeau: Son of Quebec, Father of Canada, 1919-1944*, trans. William Johnson (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2006), and John English, *Citizen of the World: The Life of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, Volume One: 1919-1968* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2006).

During the 1960s, with the revival of nationalism in Quebec and the concurrent demand for more powers from Ottawa to defend the French language in Quebec, Trudeau became disenchanted with the Quebec Liberal Party. In his essay “The New Treason of the Intellectuals,” he condemned neo-nationalists and separatists and their belief in the need for the nation to be sovereign as a “self-deluding passion of a large segment of our thinking population for throwing themselves headlong – intellectually and spiritually – into purely escapist pursuits” (428). For Trudeau, Quebec had all the tools it needed in the BNA Act and it did not need special status or asymmetrical federalism. It was this concern over the rise of neo-nationalism, especially the separatist variety and its potential to affect the future of Canada, that led him and the other “wise men” into federal politics “to defend federalism against the separatist threat” (450). The *Nemnis* show us remarkably well how these views emerged.

John English picks up where the *Nemnis* leave off, although he has also provided an excellent analysis of Trudeau’s early years in his first volume. Like the *Nemnis*, English gives a sympathetic portrayal of Trudeau; but it is also a balanced, straightforward, and chronological analysis of his life from 1968 to his death in 2000, and the work is based on unprecedented access to Trudeau’s personal papers. Everything is here: the glamorous people, the political trenches, the grand gestures and petty bickering, the highs of the 1980 referendum victory, the lows of the National Energy Program, and, above all, the constitution, politics, and Quebec. Much of the story is familiar: Trudeaumania, Trudeau’s firm stand against the FLQ during the October Crisis, the Official Languages Act, the introduction of multiculturalism, the economic downturns of the 1970s, the patriation of the constitution, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the fall in popularity and then from power, the unprecedented return for another election in 1980, the peace mission, and his return to the spotlight in opposition to the Meech Lake Accord.

English’s canvas is much wider than that of the *Nemnis*, and he takes a broader look at Trudeau’s personal world (including his love life and marriage breakdown) and political activities (with elements of economic policy, regionalism, foreign policy, and Canadian-American relations). English demonstrates why he is regarded as one of Canada’s pre-eminent historians: this is a solid, eloquent, and readable biography. As might be expected, Trudeau’s political and constitutional struggles never strayed far beyond the banks of the Ottawa and St. Lawrence rivers, and Atlantic Canada only rarely makes an appearance in either English’s or the *Nemnis*’ book – other than as the recipient of a regional adjustment program or the odd unwanted interjection of a Maritime premier during a constitutional conference. Nevertheless, the two works complement each other; the *Nemnis* utilize their impressive training in French/European political theory to flesh out Trudeau’s intellectual maturing process; English brings a fine blend of academic rigor, indefatigable research, and years of experience in Ottawa as a Liberal MP to examine Trudeau’s career in the ever-changing context of political Ottawa. These two impressive biographies will stand as the definitive works on Trudeau for years to come.

For many years John Turner worked alongside Pierre Trudeau, and their relationship was not always a happy one as shown by Paul Litt in his *Elusive Destiny: The Political Vocation of John Napier Turner*. Written with the cooperation

of John Turner and with access to his papers, family, colleagues, and friends, the book is easily the best on Turner to date and it has all the hallmarks of good biography: exhaustive research, critical analysis, and attention to detail. It is also well written and informative. Litt focuses on Turner's political life and traces his early years in Ottawa (where he was raised by his mother and steeped in the Ottawa world of politicians and mandarins – yes, he even met Mackenzie King and little "Pat" walking in the local park), his student days at the University of British Columbia, his Rhodes Scholarship and law degree, and his thriving law practice in Montreal. Given his good looks and athletic ability, Turner was on course to become Canada's answer to JFK, and it is easy to see his world in swinging '60s Montreal – with its hard-working, hard-drinking, smoking, and partying group of young professionals – as a Canadian version of *Mad Men*. But Turner was no Don Draper; there is no womanizing or mysterious background in his story, and he maintained throughout his public life a strong religious faith and devotion to public duty. What does emerge is a picture of Turner as a masculine, profane, talented, ambitious, and devout man who, Litt argues, represented a distinct brand of Canadian Liberalism in the tradition of King, St. Laurent, and Howe. He believed in individual freedom balanced against the common good, and in a mixture of political freedom and economic security in which government has a role to play. "Turner's outlook," Litt writes, "blended the liberal concern for individual freedom with the moral claims of social justice and a technocratic faith in rational planning" (46-7). Reminiscent of King's pragmatism, Turner also appeared more flexible on Quebec and provincial rights vis-à-vis Trudeau's hard line; he was, according to Litt, "a centrist always seeking equilibrium" (161).

Turner entered politics because of a strong sense of public duty and, it seemed, because he was destined to do so (becoming minister of consumer and corporate affairs in 1967). As a rising star in the Liberal Party, Turner's leadership hopes were dashed by the entrance of Pierre Trudeau into the 1968 leadership race. Trudeau, the more unconventional "anti-hero," appealed to young Canadians and, especially, francophones, and he sapped Turner's support. Trudeau won, Turner lost, and there began a rivalry and a peculiar and difficult relationship. Turner persevered, however, as an outstanding cabinet minister, shepherding through Parliament the famous "Just Society" Criminal Law Amendment Act dealing with abortion, gay rights, gun control, lotteries, and more (despite some moral misgivings over the bill's content). Likewise, he was there for the passage of the War Measures Act and he defended it even though he was skeptical and reluctant to do so. These were not the only occasions when he found himself at odds with the direction of the Trudeau government, and he eventually left politics to wait for a second shot at the leadership. Turner won the prize in 1984, and then things began to fall apart. He immediately entered an unwinnable election campaign, for which he was disorganized, unprepared, and hamstrung by patronage appointments, an unsupportive predecessor, and a general desire for change. He looked rusty and out of touch; as one journalist wrote, "Turner was OK for television 10 years ago when television was stiff itself, but now you've got to be natural, and John just can't be natural" (240). From 1984 to 1988, while he rebuilt the party, raised money, and recruited candidates, Opposition leader Turner faced more challenges to his leadership than Mackenzie King did over a quarter of a century. Fate intervened with

the Meech Lake Accord and the Free Trade Agreement (FTA); the former he believed would be good for national unity, while the latter he thought might destroy the country. In the 1988 election he rose to the occasion as the leader of the anti-free trade forces, and he almost turned the campaign around with a strong debate performance; but in the end it was not enough. Litt persuasively argues that Turner never received the support he deserved from his colleagues or from Trudeau and Chrétien who, rather, worked to undermine his leadership. He also never got a fair deal from the media, which loved scandal and pounced on all his mistakes. Turner resigned in 1990, leaving a rebuilt Liberal Party and retaining his dignity but not much else.

Years before, in 1975, when Turner resigned as minister of finance, there was considerable speculation that he would take over as Conservative leader from Robert Stanfield, and one wonders if he made the wrong decision to remain a Liberal. Litt describes Turner's "socially progressive and fiscally conservative instincts" (202), and it is hard not to see in him something of R.B. Bennett and the "Red Tory." As a cabinet minister he defended legislation over which he had sincere moral doubts; later, he questioned Trudeau's position on Quebec and expressed views that were not radically out of line with Joe Clark's "community of communities." Conversely, as a *Tory* prime minister or Mulroney's finance minister, he might have been able to amend and improve both Meech and the FTA. But he stayed a Liberal, supporting a brand of Liberalism that was out of style during the Trudeau era. He, rather than Trudeau, may have been, as Litt argues, the "legitimate heir of a long-standing Canadian Liberal tradition" (399), but knowing so would likely have provided Turner with little comfort.

For most of the 20th century, as these books show, it was raining Liberals on the national political stage, and this explains the title of Naomi E.S. Griffiths's *The Golden Age of Liberalism: A Portrait of Roméo LeBlanc*. Griffiths was LeBlanc's lifelong friend, and this is an affectionate look at the life of a rather shy, unassuming, yet passionate Acadian man who spent much of his life struggling to live and teach in the French language. Born in rural New Brunswick, LeBlanc taught at the New Brunswick Teachers' College, moved to Radio-Canada in 1959 as a reporter and foreign correspondent in London and Washington, and returned to Ottawa as Lester Pearson's press secretary in 1967. He continued under Trudeau and was encouraged to enter politics in 1972, ultimately becoming Canada's longest serving minister of fisheries. In 1984, in that flurry of patronage appointments, LeBlanc was appointed to the Senate and, in 1995, he became the first Acadian governor general.

The lack of sources (LeBlanc left little in the way of correspondence or diaries) is a problem and LeBlanc occasionally fades from the page in favour of background descriptions of events that influenced his life, such as Acadian history, postwar Paris, the Quiet Revolution, linguistic politics in New Brunswick, and the Diefenbaker government. It also probably makes him appear as less influential a cabinet minister than he actually was; he was a strong supporter, for example, of the inclusion of minority education and language rights in the constitution, but his part in that process is not fully developed. Equally, his role as regional minister for New Brunswick suffers from a lack of detail. LeBlanc also appears as a man not overtly ambitious, but new and interesting jobs regularly opened up for him. Although the theme is not deeply explored, early friendships from the Catholic student movement

with the likes of Marc Lalonde and Gérard Pelletier must have helped. Nevertheless, LeBlanc's commitment to his Acadian heritage, to New Brunswick, and to a bilingual Canada was profound. And, like Trudeau and Turner, he remained a devoted Catholic. It is interesting – even refreshingly old-fashioned – to see in these men this combination of religious faith and public duty.

These eight books clearly show that Canadian political biography is alive and well. Grounded in rich archival sources and secondary literature, they are academic in tone but aimed at the non-specialist reading public. They hinge on the interplay of character and circumstance and repeatedly demonstrate the importance of timing – or fate – in political leadership. The authors have not dodged the challenges of writing political biography, nor have they fully avoided the pitfalls. With perhaps the exception of Allan Levine, all the authors identify and clearly sympathize with their subjects and defend their actions in the face of public criticism (both past and present). At the same time, none of the authors has withheld criticism or judgment when warranted or failed to maintain the essential scholarly distance between biographer and subject. Furthermore, they remind us just how much supposedly “national” politics really occurred within the Ottawa-Montreal-Toronto triangle. An argument can be made that the defining element of Canadian political history has always been national unity and the relationship between Canada's major linguistic groups, but all too often the West, East, and North go missing. For too many Canadians, when gaining entry into the national political arena, regional perspectives were to be left at the front door.

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