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PRESENTATION / PRÉSENTATION

Harry Ferns, Bernard Ostry, and *The Age of Mackenzie King*: Liberal Orthodoxy and its Discontents in the 1950s

Christopher Dummitt

WHAT DOES AN ACADEMIC ARTICLE look like? We are all familiar with the basic advice on how to write an essay, how to lay out an introduction, how the body of the essay should follow up on this, provide evidence that is nicely “sign-posted” throughout, that links back to the argument, and how a conclusion should neatly summarize the material and, ideally, point to its significance. It is all so simple, so clear, so uniform. Historians will occasionally begin with a telling anecdote but this is generally as far as they go in experimentation. Although we tend not to be like social scientists who have explicit “Theory” and “Methodology” sections at the beginning of our papers, we nonetheless follow the same pattern in a more intuitive fashion.

Does an academic article have to look this way? The following piece of writing is meant, in part, as a contribution to a debate about how we write as professional historians. This article deliberately takes up a literary style of story telling that is, at present, not respected or at least not followed widely in the profession.

The best writerly advice outside of academia has always been “Show, don’t tell.” The writing here is based on this principle. The article aims to be like a novella. The aim is to create a portrait of historical figures and a historical moment that others can recognize and grasp on their own terms. The argument is presented indirectly. The intention is to demonstrate the nature of a historical moment by anecdote, circumstance, and character description.

Since the 1960s, historians in Canada and elsewhere have widened the scope of what counts as viable subjects of historical study. The theoretical and political viewpoints deemed acceptable have similarly expanded. We have,

altogether, a much more inclusive history than ever before. The aim of this article in part is to suggest that a next logical step is for historians think more expansively about the form in which we present this history. I have elaborated these arguments more extensively elsewhere.¹ This article is one practical example of what a truly inclusive history could look like.



IT ONLY TAKES A FEW WORDS to change a life. For Harry Ferns, the words were “The Department of National Defence has now indicated that your services are not acceptable.”² It was August 1949 and Harry Ferns was on the brink of leaving for Vancouver Island with his wife and three children to start work as an Assistant Professor at the Canadian Service College at Royal Rhodes. He had spent much of the summer preparing courses to teach; the house in Winnipeg was sold and he was on the verge of buying a new home in British Columbia. One vague bureaucratic sentence washed it all away. Why?

No one would give Harry Ferns a straight answer. He wrote to the Minister of Defence, Brooke Claxton, and received no answer. He wrote to Charles Bland, the head of the Civil Service Commission, and did not get a reply. He sent a telegram. No response. Harry Ferns had entered the Kafkaesque world of Cold War state security.

He did, of course, have his suspicions. Harry Ferns was one of the educated few – that relatively small group of university-educated Canadians in the middle of the twentieth century from which so many of the nation’s political, economic and academic elite was drawn. He hadn’t reached that point by birth or privilege. Raised on the prairies to an English family, Ferns had excelled in matters of the intellect. He managed to scrounge together the money to get himself to the University of Manitoba in the midst of the depression and did not waste his chance. Ferns impressed his professors with his keen intellect. He was a thin, earnest and intense young man. When he got the chance to go abroad, to Cambridge in the late 1930s, he not only survived the stint, he excelled.

1. Christopher Dummitt, “After Inclusiveness: The Future of Canadian History,” in Christopher Dummitt and Michael Dawson, eds., *Contesting Clio’s Craft: New Directions and Debates in Canadian History* (London 2009), 98–122 and Christopher Dummitt, “The Art of History,” *Canadian Issues/Thèmes Canadiens* (Fall 2008), 4–6.

2. H. S. Ferns fonds (hereafter HSFF), Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), MG 32, G 16, Box 3, file “Min. of Defence,” R. Morgan to H. S. Ferns, 4 August 1949. The Ferns fonds at Library and Archives Canada have not yet been officially organized nor has a finding aid been created. The names of the files are, therefore, quite arbitrary and sometimes do not give any hint of what is actually in the file. I have used the names that were physically on the files as of August 2009. The account below of Ferns’s dealings with the Ministry of Defence is based on documents in this file (cited individually where quoted) as well as H. S. Ferns, *Reading from Left to Right: One Man’s Political Journey* (Toronto 1983), various pages.

The voyage by ship to England, though, was as much political initiation as geographical crossing. Ferns spent his time on board thick in conversation with a Major Hooper, retired from the British Indian Army, and a Marxist. They talked about the Spanish civil war, about Marxism in general. Ferns had a “eureka” moment. Marxism’s clear logic was appealing: it demystified so much contemporary hocus-pocus; it struck through alleged common-sense to get to the objective, scientific, material truth of life. It matched the economic history he had been learning, the way Harold Innis’s “staples theory” struck through to the essential material truth of Canadian history; it matched a certain kind of rough justice he had learned on the streets of Winnipeg; its taboo-breaking truth-telling also appealed to Ferns as a newly married man trying to figure out the realities of sexual life in the midst of a culture of hushed, repressive silence. When he arrived at Cambridge he became involved with a group of communists who organized a student group focused on colonial policy in the Empire. He joined the Communist Party without joining the party; he never had a party card but he believed, for a time at least, in the cause.

He later couldn’t say at what point he lost his faith – at some point in 1939 or 1940. He remained on the left, believing in some elements of Marxism, but he was not a communist. It was a common enough transition. It was also a transition that would later be hard to explain when the “c” of communism became the scarlet letter for a new age of anxiety and fear. During the war, however, his leftwing beliefs did not seem to be an issue in how highly his government regarded his services. He had written his civil service exams back in 1935, finishing third, and when the British military rejected, for medical reasons, his attempt to enlist, Ferns returned to Canada to take up a post in External Affairs. As often happened, the prime minister, Mackenzie King, who also was his own Minister of External Affairs, “borrowed” Ferns. The former non-card carrying communist joined the ranks of King’s ill-treated secretarial staff.

Ferns was not a good civil servant. He was brilliant, but too outspoken. He didn’t have what his more politically restrained colleagues called “good judgment.” This seemed to mean that he had his own ideas not based on what his superiors would find acceptable, and he pushed them. In 1944 he left the civil service and went into academia. There too, though, Ferns was a little too outspoken for his colleagues and those who ran the business-side of the university. At United College in Winnipeg his contract was not renewed after Ferns took too active a role in running a cooperative newspaper in the city. He went on to the University of Manitoba, but there too some senior colleagues thought Harry Ferns ought to keep his mouth shut in public so as to not discredit the institution. Later in his life, he recollected that he had been “fired from every job I ever had in Canada, not because of incompetence[,] but because I asserted some obvious truths a few years before the rest of the Canadian community.” The words were bitter, and true.³

3. On Ferns as civil servant, Queen’s University Archives (hereafter QUA), Grant Dexter fonds

In 1949, then, when he was offered the job at Royal Rhodes, he had been as surprised as he was pleased. Perhaps his luck was turning. Perhaps this job would bring the security yearned for by so many newly formed families in these uncertain postwar years. It was not to be. The letter told him, belatedly with the house sold and the family on the verge of moving, that he didn't have the job after all.

It was then, in the autumn of 1949, that his wife asked if it might not be best to try another country altogether. The government and university world in Canada kept shoving obstacle after obstacle in his path. He had done so well at Cambridge; why not try England? The decision to leave was a relief, but it did not entirely drain his anger at how the government had treated him. When he was moving out of his house in Winnipeg, he noticed a car parked across the road. A man was sitting in the driver's seat. Just sitting there. Was he watching? What did he want? Two hours later, with the watcher still in place across the street, Ferns ferreted out all the books about Lenin in his house and stuffed them in the furnace – just in case. The family travelled east by train but before taking ship for England they made one last stop in Ottawa.

The smallness of the Ottawa establishment helped. Ferns had friends in high places. When he had worked in Mackenzie King's office he had befriended Leonard Brockington who was, at the time, working in Ottawa ostensibly as a kind of war information publicist, spicing up the dour, intricate speeches of his boss, Mackenzie King. It was a depressing job, all the more so because King refused to be "spiced." The former first chairman of the CBC, prominent lawyer and frequent radio commentator was a fixture in Liberal Ottawa.

When Ferns came to him in the autumn of 1949, then, Brockington was able to get Ferns in to see Brooke Claxton's deputy minister. Ferns demanded, politely but firmly, an explanation as to why the government was not living up to its end of the contract. For that is how Ferns saw it. He had been offered a job. He had accepted and made arrangements based on that contract. Now, the government was backing out.

The Deputy Minister, Drury, refused responsibility. This was a matter for the Civil Service Commission. They made all personnel decisions. But Ferns had already been to see them, and they had said the decision came from the Ministry of Defence. Drury was unmoved, inscrutable – though he did blink when Ferns asked if the decision had anything to do with a speech he gave in 1947 to the Canadian-Soviet Friendship Council. The deputy minister admitted that this was a "plausible inference." Ferns would have to admit, Drury said, that it would be "inadvisable for the Government to employ on a federal

(hereafter GDF), 2142, Box 7, file 2, [Grant Dexter] to Tom [Crerar], 4 January 1956; Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections, York University (hereafter CTA), Bernard Ostry fonds (hereafter BOF), F0370, 1991–030, vol. 20, file 138, Harry Ferns to James Lorimer, 3 November 1976. Ferns' case has also been discussed in Michiel Horn, *Academic Freedom in Canada: A History* (Toronto 1999), 190–191 and Reg Whitaker and Gary Marcuse, *Cold War Canada: The Making of a National Insecurity State, 1945–1957* (Toronto 1994), 107–109.

education project a person who is ... a controversial figure and a likely whipping boy."⁴

Ferns left for England in late 1949, uncertain of his future. He had, though, bestirred enough people to temporarily unsettle the waters in Liberal Ottawa. Many academics, and even some businessmen associated with the university world, when they heard about how the government had treated Ferns, felt that this just wasn't proper, gentlemanly behaviour. The historian W. L. Morton wrote to Claxton on his behalf as did the head of United College in Winnipeg who had let Ferns go from his post only two years earlier. On 23 January, Charles Bland wrote from the Civil Service Commission to say that the government was offering him \$2000 in compensation. It did not cover nearly all of his losses, but it was something.⁵ It was also, in these years, an uncommon acknowledgement of responsibility on the part of the federal government.

A month later the cheque came, but so did a release form. If he wanted the money Ferns would have to agree not to pursue the matter any further. Ferns needed the money and so he signed the form but fired off a scathing retort saying he did so only under duress. "There is only one way in which the Government of Canada can undo the libel they have committed," he wrote. That is, "... to permit me to be examined under oath with respect to any reports concerning my reliability as a citizen.... In matters affecting my honour I do not accept money."⁶

What Ferns didn't know at the time was that he had lost the job because of the simple error of a translator compounded by the suspicious and unaccountable process of Canadian state security. Ferns' name had shown up in records provided by the Soviet cipher clerk Igor Gouzenko who had defected in 1945. A translator seems to have made an error in translating from the Cyrillic script into English, making it seem as if Harry Ferns was a scientist at a National Research Council laboratory in Montreal in whom the Soviets were interested. This, of course, wasn't the Harry Ferns of Winnipeg. But this mistake, plus his record of communist sympathy at Cambridge, was enough to tar him for life for those in the RCMP and the Ministry of Defence.⁷

4. LAC, HSFF, MG 32, G 16, Box 3 file "Min. of Defence," H. S. Ferns to Brooke Claxton, 8 October 1949.

5. On support for Ferns see LAC, HSFF, MG 32, G 16, Box 3, file "Applications correspondence," W. C. Graham to H. S. Ferns, 21 November 1949; LAC, HSFF, MG 32, G 16, Box 3 file "Min. of Defence," Leonard Brockington to H. S. Ferns, 1 December 1949; LAC, HSFF, MG 32, G 16, Box 3 file "Morton et al crs 2," W. L. Morton to H. S. Ferns, 7 December 1953. On government offer of settlement: LAC, HSFF, MG 32, G 16, Box 3 file "Min. of Defence," Charles Bland to H. S. Ferns, 23 January 1950.

6. LAC, HSFF, MG 32, G 16, Box 3 file "Min. of Defence," H. S. Ferns to Charles H. Bland, 12 March 1950.

7. Whitaker and Marcuse, *Cold War Canada*, 108.

Harry Ferns (c.1950): "... fired from every job I ever had in Canada, not because of incompetence[,] but because I asserted some obvious truths a few years before the rest of the Canadian community."

Credit: H. S. Ferns, H. S. Ferns fonds, Library and Archives Canada, MG32 G16 Vol. 6.



The sting of being labelled “unreliable” stuck with Ferns. So did his treatment by the Liberal establishment. Later that year Ferns took up a position at the University of Birmingham in England. He was starting a new life but couldn’t shake the feeling that he had been kicked out of his own country. He decided to take the longer view: “I am content to leave the actions of Mr Claxton and his associates in the Department of National Defence to history and their own consciences,” he wrote in March 1950.⁸ History would have the final say.

It may have helped, though, that Ferns was a historian.



WILLIAM LYON MACKENZIE KING, prime minister of Canada for longer than anyone else, and maker of Liberal political fortunes in the first half of the twentieth century, died a few months later. The journalists had been ready for years. If journalism is the first draft of history, then journalistic obituaries

8. LAC, HSFF, MG 32, G 16, Box 3 file “Min. of Defence,” H. S. Ferns to Charles H. Bland, 12 March 1950.

are the final paragraphs of that first draft. King was all over the papers and the airwaves for that week. Canadians were told of King's immense success in winning elections, his early days in the civil service, his first time in Parliament and in Laurier's Cabinet. They learned, or were reminded, of his work with the Rockefellers during the Great War, and his triumphant return to pick up Laurier's mantle. They read of, and listened to, accounts of his first years as prime minister, his famous bout with Lord Byng in 1926, his loss to Bennett in 1930 and then his return in 1935. They especially saw pictures of King as the wartime prime minister, with Roosevelt and Churchill and then later at the founding of the United Nations.

Journalists touched on all of the highlights, stooping only occasionally into what some would see as the lowlights. It was, though, only a matter of time. King had been successful, but not popular. Even his most loyal supporters admitted that. The battle over how King would be remembered was only just beginning. Key members of the Liberal government knew that King would need to be defended in the coming years. Defending King – at least in part – was the same as defending the Liberal party. A Liberal statesman of the highest order had passed away. Some kind of monument needed to be established. There would, in time, be more than one monument. King's former homes were turned into museums; there were scholarships in his name; and there was to be an official biography written by the political scientist Robert MacGregor Dawson with access to all of King's private papers.

But King's death had set many to thinking critically about the former prime minister and Liberal government in 1950s Canada. The publication of King's will made certain of this. King had died a very wealthy man, with an estate of more than \$750,000. He had left much of it to the nation and Leonard Brockington had been called upon to smooth over the revelation of King's riches with a radio address that paid homage to King's devotion and service to the nation. But no matter how adroitly Brockington explained the generous bequests, the size of King's estate still raised eyebrows. How could a man who had for so much of his life worked in the public service, who had grown up in a somewhat comfortable but by no means wealthy family, who had been a friend of the working man, who had always pleaded penury to his friends – how could such a man have amassed a fortune?⁹

It didn't help that reports from an English newspaper began filtering through to Canada only weeks after King's death which claimed that King had practiced spiritualism – or maybe a spiritism – one couldn't be sure about

9. LAC, Jack Pickersgill fonds (hereafter JPF), MG32, B34, vol. 278, file 5, "Copy of Last Will and Testament of The Right Honourable W. L. Mackenzie King, embodying amendments contained in a Codicil dated June 24, 1950," Gowling, MacTavish, Watt, Osborne & Henderson, Ottawa, Canada; LAC, Violet Rosa Markham Carruthers fonds, MG32 F6, vol. 1, "WLM King – Bequests 1950," "Broadcast over C.B.C. Network, August 8, 1950 By Mr. L.W. Brockington." On criticism of the Will, see [roundup column on arts] *Globe & Mail*, 1 September 1950; "New Light on Mr. King," J. V. McAree, *Globe & Mail*, 10 November 1950.

terminology. These were not the kinds of stories to dominate headlines – it wouldn't have been proper – but they did show up in small columns, read with great interest across the country. They were fuel to partisan fire. What would have happened if this had been known while King was alive? Could he have kept the votes of Roman Catholic Quebec? Once again, King had been lucky said his Conservative foes. These were the muddy sorts of gossip that lingered in the months after King's death.¹⁰ They made for an odd juxtaposition – the sober declamations of statesmanlike service alongside the grubby gossip of money and ghosts.

Perhaps some other form of commentary might be possible. Surely in modern industrial Canada there was a yearning for an approach to politics which dispensed with the mystifying partisanship of a bygone era. Such a book would sell. It might even earn its author a handsome profit.

Or so thought Harry Ferns.



THE IDEA FOR THE BIOGRAPHY, Ferns later claimed, came to him almost immediately. He had already written some pieces on King for newspapers and magazines. These were "... fair and appreciative, but in no way sycophantic and apologetic...." They were certainly better than "the sort of drivelling guff" that later came from some Liberal friendly journalists quick to jump on the Mackenzie King bandwagon.¹¹ But how could he actually make it work? He had lectures to write, classes to teach. There was the Cambridge PhD dissertation on Anglo-Argentine relations he was supposed to be finishing and turning into a book. How could he manage to fit the lucrative prospective of a Mackenzie King biography into this life, and somehow also manage to be a husband and father at the same time?

The answer was near at hand. His name was Bernard Ostry.

Bernie Ostry was a charmer. The young Jewish Canadian man from Flin Flon, Manitoba made an impression – usually, but not always, a good one. He had been a student of Harry Ferns in Manitoba and had come to England to do graduate studies at the London School of Economics. When they met again in England, Ferns was impressed. Ostry was growing up, becoming more purposeful, certain. He hadn't lost his style, though. Ostry was not your typical graduate student – not unless one expects graduate students to dress in finely tailored clothes, drive fancy cars, collect art and run businesses on the side. Women liked Bernie Ostry very much. His friend Julie Medlock wrote of Ostry in these years: "Your brief visits are like bolts of lightning. There you are

10. LAC, William Lyon Mackenzie King fonds (WLMKF), M26, J17, vol. 4, file 15, Handy to Cummins, 2 Nov 1950; "New Light on Mr. King," J. V. McAree, *Globe & Mail* 10 November 1950; "Commends Mr. King for his Faith," [letter to editor] *Globe & Mail*, 18 November 1950.

11. Ferns, *Reading From Left to Right*, 298.



Bernard Ostry (1959):
 "... young, handsome, intelligent, debonair ..."

Credit: Tsin Van, Bernard Ostry, Library and Archives Canada, archival reference number R13065-83-4-E, e008299483.

– looking young, handsome, intelligent, debonair ... in sort of an old-wordly manner.... And then poof! You are gone. Sort of like a scene in history – on film."¹² He could have the same effect on men. When the CBC journalist Patrick Nicholson introduced Ostry to radio listeners, he felt compelled to note that Ostry's fashionable clothes, his "sense of humour" and "considerable personal charm.... does not conform at all to the popular idea of the professor as a shaggy old stumblewit."¹³

Ostry was a political animal who managed to make himself well connected on the left of the Labour Party when he was in the UK in the early Fifties. He even managed to secure himself a position for a short time with V. K. Krishna Menon when this stalwart of interwar socialist London transitioned to being the representative of newly independent India at the United Nations.¹⁴ Ostry

12. CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991–030, vol. 156, file 1190, Julie Medlock to Bernard Ostry, 9 September 1954.

13. On Ostry's finances, CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 158, file 1278, Shinbane Dorfman & Kanee to Bernard Ostry, 17 July 1953 and Russell W. Kerr to Bernard Ostry, 20 November 1953. On others' response to Ostry, CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 19, file 1, "Patrick Nicholson interviews Professor Bernard Ostry", 6 November 1955, ["Report From Parliament Hill" – Radio Program]. See also Ramsay Cook, "The Age of Mackenzie King," *Globe and Mail*, 22 January 1977, 39; Ferns, *Reading From Left to Right*, 299.

14. Thayil Jacob Sony George, *Krishna Menon: A Biography* (London 1964) and on one aspect of Menon's time in London, Jeremy Lewis, *Penguin Special: The Story of Allen Lane, the Founder of Penguin Books and the Man Who Changed Publishing Forever* (New York 2005), 114–116.

wanted to “make it.” He was wealthy but the money was newly acquired. His family had made its wealth starting in the dry goods business in Manitoba and moving on to larger investments. He had style but he was from a small town called Flin Flon. He was Jewish in a 1950s Canada where that was noticed, and often not appreciated. One could be successful and even accepted as Jewish in these years but not without some reasonable expectation that you wouldn’t be treated fairly. Pierre Berton did a series of stories in *Maclean’s* in which he had someone pose as a potential customer at prestigious resorts in Ontario’s cottage country. When the customer had a Jewish name the resorts claimed to be full up; but miraculously there was space for those with more reliably Christian surnames. Canada was open-minded enough to have Berton’s story run in a national magazine, but anti-Semitic enough to need the story in the first place.¹⁵

For different reasons, Ferns and Ostry had little time for what they saw as the stodgy political reasoning of the status quo. In Canada, the culture was a shocking mix of the decaying old and the unwanted new. The Liberal government in Ottawa was the same as always. Indeed, many of the same cabinet ministers continued to occupy the same posts. There was C. D. Howe still at work, and St Laurent in his 70s. Jimmy Gardiner was still the voice of the west. Even when they retired, many old Liberals, like T. A. Crerar or Chubby Power, just moved off to the Senate to help govern from the Upper Chamber. The age of Mackenzie King went on and on.

The letters friends wrote to Ferns and Ostry betrayed this sense of disappointment and disbelief about postwar realities and the way materialism had edged out more utopian political hopes. Ostry’s friend, Julie Medlock, wrote from New York: : “I am so out of sympathy with what is going on here – I literally cringe every time I hear a radio commercial, and the unconscious materialism of this society and its moral perversions are just things I can no longer live with.” Another friend wrote to Ferns saying how she was so looking forward to visiting with him in England. “We should have some long pleasant evenings of good conversation without the distraction of television. Everybody here is completely mesmerized by television. The art of conversation is completely and totally lost. Whenever one visits friends these days, the first thing one is handed is a drink, then the television set is turned on, and that’s the end of a promising evening. I’ve gotten to the point now where I can’t speak in more than two syllable words.” W. L. Morton, an intellectual but certainly not a radical, complained of “... the growing stodginess of Canadian life. The boom, the American crusade against Communism, the provincialism of a great and struggling country, the conformist disposition of our best minds ...

15. Julie Medlock’s response to Ostry’s being from Flin Flon gives a sense of the social distance he was travelling: CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 156, file 1190, Julie Medlock to Bernard Ostry, 31 July 1955. A. B. McKillop, *Pierre Berton: A Biography* (Toronto 2008), 229. On the mixed progress away from anti-semitism in the period, Gerald Tulchinsky, *Canada’s Jews: A People’s Journey* (Toronto 2008), 413–416.

are stronger now than ever. Inevitably the demagoguery which results from the decay of intellectual and political principle is growing apace.”¹⁶

This was the cultural battle that Ferns and Ostry were engaged in when they set out to write the *The Age of Mackenzie King*. They were like two altarboys who had snuck off to read *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. The difference, of course, was that these two wayward lads were bent on writing their own book. The partnership was, in principle, quite simple. Ferns would stay in Birmingham. He initiated the project and he would organize the material and write the book. Ostry had the money, time and ability to do the grunt work of research, travelling back and forth to Canada and the United States, visiting archives and hunting down sources. He also, they hoped, had the gumption and charm to get disaffected elderly Liberals and Tories to open up their personal papers to two unknown Canadian scholars who no longer even lived in Canada. All was kept relatively secret. Ostry was dispatched to Ottawa to see what kinds of documents were available. Ferns and Ostry hid their true intent, saying that Ostry was to be engaged upon a study of Canadian politics in the early twentieth century. That was vague enough not to raise suspicions but precise enough to get access to the right sorts of papers.

Why did they feel the need for subterfuge? Surely there wouldn’t be a problem with writing a biography of a former prime minister, even a potentially negative biography? They were, after all, scholars.

Ferns and Ostry weren’t so sure.



IT HAPPENED ONE DAY in January 1953. Bernard Ostry was going through the Wilfrid Laurier papers in the Dominion Archives in Ottawa, searching out references to Mackenzie King. When he left for lunch, the papers were on his desk; when he returned they weren’t there. Where did they go? The answer was vague: the papers were no longer available.

Ostry went for advice to Ferns’ friend Leonard Brockington who suggested that Ostry visit Jack Pickersgill, the Clerk of the Privy Council. Pickersgill was Canada’s top civil servant, the man who worked with cabinet to act as the voice between the political and administrative forms of government. He had also been an assistant to Mackenzie King and was, despite his allegedly neutral civil servant position, a strong Liberal. To top matters off, he was one of Mackenzie King’s literary executors. What would Pickersgill have to do with getting access to papers at the Public Archives? Ostry suspected the worst but went off for a visit regardless.

16. CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, Vol. 156, file 1190, Julie Medlock to Bernard Ostry, 8 January 1955; LAC, HSF, MG 32, G 16, Box 7 file [unnamed – various crsp], Thelma Johnson to H. S. Ferns, 29 December 1953; LAC, HSF, MG 32, G 16, Box 3 file “Morton et al crsp,” W. L. Morton to H. S. Ferns, 20 May 1952.

Jack Pickersgill (June 1953): "bureaucratic politeness"

Credit: Phillip S Shackleton, J. W. Pickersgill, Library and Archives Canada, accession number 1971-271, item 66008, e000756957.



Ostry demanded to know why he was refused access to the papers of Wilfrid Laurier. He threatened to go to his Member of Parliament and raise the issue of whether the "... clerk of the Privy council seemed an inappropriate person to determine who should and who should not look at the Laurier Papers." Pickersgill could give no adequate explanation. He responded with bureaucratic politeness, the kind that rarely leads to satisfaction. Ostry would not get an answer here. He left the office but when he got back to the Archives, the Laurier Papers were once again, without any explanation, open for him to inspect.¹⁷

This incident reinforced in Ostry and Ferns a sense that there were forces out to get them. "I am gathering the impression very quickly that there is developing in Canada a King cult designed to prevent any effective, well documented reconsideration of his role in Canadian life," Ferns wrote. The incident in January 1953 was the first of several. The archives lost track of certain papers they were supposed to send to Ostry in England; they didn't accept that he

17. CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 155, file 1178, Bernard Ostry to W. Kaye Lamb, 24 February 1954. On the incident, CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 155, file 1157, H. S. Ferns to W. L. Morton, 6 May 1953.

had permission to view other papers; they first reported that they could copy some papers onto microfilm and then later, when Ostry had returned to England, reported that they couldn't make copies. In each case there was a logical, if sometimes befuddled, explanation. It was especially awkward when Ostry was not sent papers because they had been removed by those working on the official biography of King. "What is the status of the Laurier House organization?" Ostry asked the chief archivist, W. Kaye Lamb. "Can they come into the Archives and disorganize or organize material for their own purposes in a way which makes it difficult for a member of the public like myself to make use of public facilities?"¹⁸

Lamb couldn't adequately answer Ostry's questions. How could he? The man in charge of the Public Archives, the man who made decisions about what papers were open, which papers could be consulted, was also one of Mackenzie King's literary executors. Lamb no doubt thought he could play both roles successfully. He was an able, competent and likely a fair administrator. His own documents suggest that he saw Ostry as a too assertive intrusion into the life of the archives, but also as a source of potential embarrassment and someone to be handled carefully. There is no direct evidence that there was any conspiracy to keep documents from Ostry.¹⁹ Nonetheless, Lamb's dual status only reinforced the idea that official Ottawa was also Liberal Ottawa. It didn't help that later that year Jack Pickersgill was parachuted into a safe Newfoundland riding to join the Liberal government and the Cabinet as Secretary of State. He was widely rumoured to be a potential successor to Louis St Laurent and future prime minister. It was becoming a well-trod path – from the senior civil service into the Liberal cabinet – just like Lester Pearson and just like Mackenzie King.



WAS IT POSSIBLE TO PUBLISH a book in Canada that took a critical approach to Mackenzie King and, by extension, the Liberal party? Ferns and Ostry thought not and so, when they had a complete manuscript of their book in late 1953, they sent it to the British publisher Heinemann's who published in Canada under the name of British Book Services.

From the very beginning, Ostry and especially Ferns were fearful, almost paranoid, that Liberal interests would quash the book. One of King's literary executors, Norman Robertson, was Canadian High Commissioner in London. Ferns interpreted this to mean that the King defenders had a man on

18. CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 19, file 131, H. S. Ferns to W. L. Morton, 25 May 1953; CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 155, file 1178, Bernard Ostry to W. Kaye Lamb, 24 February 1954.

19. For Lamb's version of events in which Ostry was a too assertive trouble to be dealt with carefully, see Lamb's correspondence with F. W. Gibson and Norman Fee in LAC, W. K. Lamb fonds (hereafter *WKL*F), MG31, D8, vol. 6, file "F W Gibson" and file "Norman Fee."

the ground. He was also suspicious of Bruce Hutchison, the Liberal-friendly journalist who in 1952 had published *The Incredible Canadian*, a best-selling popular biography of King. Ferns warned Ostry not to spread the news of their manuscript too widely on his trips to Canada. "Hutchison & the Liberals obviously have good connections over here and we don't want them to start obstructing us." This was only the beginning of Ferns' worries. He found out that when Heinemann's sent their manuscript to readers in the UK, at least one reader had begged off from reading the text, which Ferns interpreted as being due to political timidity: "It seems to me that these fellows are afraid to go out on a limb which they think may be sawn off." Worse was yet to come. Alan Hill of Heinemann's had sent a copy off to their Canadian branch. Ostry had specifically asked them not to do this. "Now the manuscript has gone to Canada to be placed into the hands of god-knows whom," Ferns complained, "... As things are now it looks like our book is going to be spread from one end of Canada to the other."²⁰

When the readers' reports arrived, they confirmed Ferns' and Ostry's fears. The Canadian report, from Peggy Blackstock at British Books, found the book "... reflect[ed] an attitude of mind which seems to be a combination of the 'pure Canada' cult, which has been developing in recent years, and the left-wing political economist who reduces society to strata, racial and pressure groups. It is anything but objective." She was particularly offended by what she saw as derogatory comments about Canadians of Loyalist stock, the position of the Governor General and the state of parliamentary democracy. Hers was an Ontario Tory response – proud of Canada's British traditions.²¹

Another report, which didn't pick up on Blackstock's Loyalist hurt, nonetheless took a political angle. It was this angle that would continue to reappear in connection with the book. This reviewer found the book to have "much first class material and some vigorous if rather bitter passages of analysis." But ultimately, the report said the book had two main faults. First, there was a "naïve and tiresome Marxist rhetoric ... woven throughout the manuscript." The reviewer felt that their "description of each of the many strikes in which Mackenzie King was involved reads like *Daily Worker* reporting...." Second, they displayed a "bitter animosity" towards Mackenzie King which "sadly mars a powerful and largely justified indictment of his shortcomings...." Some of King's early ideas of labour relations, the reviewer suggested were actually ahead of his time. "If Mackenzie King is not being given credit for being ahead of his time at this stage," the reviewer warned, "the reader must feel 'How can I trust them later on?'" Similarly, when they rush through an account of another

20. CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 155, file 1157, H. S. Ferns to Bernard Ostry, 23 December 1953 and R. Miliband to H. S. Ferns [with note from H. S. Ferns, passed on to Bernard Ostry], 18 January 1954.

21. CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, Vol 154, file 1123, P.B. [Peggy Blackstock] "Report on THE AGE OF MACKENZIE KING," nd [circa early 1954].

strike the reviewer complains: "One gathers this incident does not fit into the picture of Mackenzie King as traitor to the working classes. We are therefore told no more about it and the authors rush on in search of other evidence with which to pillory the diabolical Mackenzie King."²²

Their editor at Heinemann's, Alan Hill, set to work on them and eventually managed to get them to agree to change the first four chapters of the book to make it more sympathetic to King. Ferns and Ostry thought that Hill had agreed, in turn, to get the book out by 1 July 1954. But the 1 July deadline would come and go, the first of several deadlines to pass with the book still not out. As the deadlines came and went, Ferns and Ostry became increasingly suspicious. They threatened to take the book elsewhere, at one point even raising the possibility of suing Heinemann's. Hill somehow managed to mollify though not please them despite more delays. He insisted that the book be sent out to Canadian and English lawyers to check it for libel. His Canadian office, notably in the person of Peggy Blackstock, kept being offended by the disrespectful tone of the book and called for more revisions.²³

It's unclear if anyone exerted pressure on Heinemann's to delay the book, but the press was certainly being extremely cautious to cover itself before it went to print. For Ostry and especially Ferns, all of the delays and changes raised the spectre of political interference. Writing in the context of Cold War anti-communism, in the stultifying atmosphere of postwar academia, they couldn't help but wonder if someone was trying to prevent this book from being published.



FERNS AND OSTRY NEEDED FRIENDS, important friends. This was Ostry's job. He spent much of 1954 and 1955 visiting and corresponding with a range of political figures in what might be called the anti-Liberal forces of 1950s Canada. These included prominent Tories like the journalist John Stevenson and former prime minister and Mackenzie King nemesis, Arthur Meighen. They also included senior English-Canadian Liberals who had known King and who were, for various reasons of which the legacy of conscription was paramount, disaffected with Mackenzie King – the Senator T. A. Crerar, Montreal Liberal A. K. Cameron and Stuart Ralston (a judge and the son of the man King was seen to have betrayed during the conscription crisis, Colonel Ralston).

22. CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 154, file 1123, Memorandum on Manuscript by Ferns and Ostry, n.d.; CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, F0370, 1991-030, Vol. 155, file 1172, Alan Hill to Bernard Ostry, 9 March 1954.

23. The correspondence on troubles with Heinemann's and Hill is lengthy, most of which can be found in CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 155, file 1172 (Hill), file 1157 (Ferns) and in LAC, HSF, MG32, G 16 vol. 2, file 12 [Heinemann].

In the first instance, of course, Ostry was digging up sources for further volumes of the biography. The current manuscript only took King up to 1919. But even more than sources, Ostry wanted credibility and connections. He was himself much more aligned with socialist thinkers and young CCFers. These weren't the friends who would get the book advertised. The prominent Tories and Liberals might do just that.

At several points in their difficult relationship with Heinmann's Ostry and Ferns considered trying to use these men to pressure Heinemann's. When the book seemed to be bogged down in mid 1955 and there were suggestions of political interference, John Stevenson even suggested as much himself. "I believe money could be found in Canada to finance [the book's] publication," he offered to Ostry. "I talked to [a] prosperous friend, who loathed King, and he said that he would be willing to put up as much as \$3000 in this good cause. Arthur Meighen would I feel sure give some money and could raise more..."²⁴

Ostry played to the egos of men like Meighen and Crerar who were aging, no longer quite in the thick of things, thinking as much to their place in history as to the present. Meighen especially still carried the grudges of lost battles. Ostry acted the role of keen young admirer. His money didn't hurt either. He sent gifts – cigars for one, liquor for another – remembered birthdays and anniversaries. He played up to their sense of history and duty, using a language of honour and chivalry that was wholly absent from his more flippant and jovial letters to closer, younger friends. Ostry visited the men on his travels in Canada in 1954 and 1955, following up with letters thanking them for their "kind hospitality" and fondly recalling the time they spent together – sitting down rye in hand and talking politics with Cameron, enjoying Meighen's company in his home. Ostry did occasionally assert his own views. More often, though, he was a fawning admirer, noting just how unsurpassed each man's knowledge was, and how valuable were their documents to the Canadian historical record.²⁵

It was these men that Ostry turned to in the summer and autumn of 1955 when it finally looked as if the book would be published. He had a grand publicity campaign planned but he needed their help to pull it off. The first salvo was an article that he and Ferns wrote on Mackenzie King's activities during the Great War that was published that summer in the *Canadian Historical Review*. This was an academic article in a staid academic journal. Even granting that there might have been greater public interest in Canadian history in these years, it would still seem incredible that Ferns and Ostry would think

24. CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 157, file 1239, John Stevenson to Bernard Ostry, 25 June 1955. See also CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 155, file 1157, H. S. Ferns to Bernard Ostry, 18 July 1954 and H. S. Ferns to Bernard Ostry, 20 July 1954.

25. On the deliberateness of Ostry's approach, CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 155, file 1157, H. S. Ferns to Bernard Ostry, n.d. [Saturday]. The correspondence itself is in CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 154, file 1139 (T. A. Crerar), vol. 156 file 1191 (Arthur Meighen), file 1220 (Stuart Ralston), vol. 157 file 1239 (Stevenson).

to use this article as a way of generating publicity. And yet they did. And, in part, it worked. Articles appeared in the *Winnipeg Tribune* and the *Vancouver Province*.

The allegations in the article were serious. The article painted King as a pro-American, anti-labour advocate, someone who stuck for too long to a position of neutrality in matters relating to the great war. "He possessed neither consistency of understanding nor consistency of emotion in relation to that great political event," Ferns and Ostry wrote. A friend reported that the article "fluttered the doves in Ottawa & the copy in the Parliamentary Library was in great demand - Liberals reading it with anxiety - others with glee." With more than a modest level of pluck, Ostry sent copies not only to friends and Tories but also to Bruce Hutchison, Paul Martin, Lester Pearson and other Liberals.²⁶

Ostry wanted controversy. Articles began to appear about the upcoming biography on Mackenzie King. The Conservatives paper *Progress Report* interviewed him and gave him top billing in an autumn 1955 issue. Ostry wasn't entirely satisfied. He complained to Meighen that the Tory papers weren't reporting nearly enough of the article's revelations. "If the Conservative Party and its leading members in the profession of journalism fail to see the real political value in something like this article," he complained, "... we have reached a sorry state of affairs." Meighen wrote back to console Ostry saying what he said was no doubt true. Meighen had taken up the issue with the editor of the *Globe & Mail* and he told Ostry to be patient; when the book arrived, the Tory press would deliver.²⁷

If Ostry was impatient, however, it may have been because the publicity campaign was not his only concern. He was meant to have worked on putting together a series of more popular articles for newspapers and magazines. He and Ferns had also hoped to sell serialization rights to the book, ideally to a publication like *Maclean's*. Ralph Allen of *Maclean's* did inquire belatedly about the book, but this led nowhere.²⁸ The book was almost certainly too critical of the Liberals, and too pointedly sarcastic, to be published in this relatively safe periodical. More importantly, the plans were begun too late. Other things had gotten in the way. And this wasn't a conspiracy or political factors; it was personal.

26. Arthur Blakely, "Will Mackenzie King Reveal Low Scandals in High Places?" *Winnipeg Tribune*, 16 September 1955; CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 155, file 1157, Bernard Ostry to H. S. Ferns, 2 February 1955; H. S. Ferns and Bernard Ostry, "Mackenzie King and the First World War," *Canadian Historical Review*, 36 (June 1955), 112; CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 154, file 1129, Colin Cameron to Bernard Ostry, 3 August 1955; CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 157, file 1239, John Stevenson to Bernard Ostry, 25 June 1955.

27. CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 156, file 1191, Bernard Ostry to Arthur Meighen, 5 September 1955 and Arthur Meighen to Bernard Ostry, 7 September 1955.

28. CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 154, file 1114, Ralph Allen to Bernard Ostry, 1 September 1955 and Ralph Allen to Bernard Ostry, 26 September 1955.



BERNIE AND HARRY HAD BEEN so close, but never quite close enough. They shared a sense of humour, a political vision, a resentment of not being at the centre of things. Their plans for the future, though, were radically different. Ferns felt at home on the outside, inhabiting his resentment, becoming the intelligent, acerbic critic. For Ostry, this was only a way station on his own way to the top. Certainly, they both could chuckle together at the ludicrous sensibilities which had dominated Canadian culture and politics up until recently. In the midst of their initial dealings with Heinemann's, Ostry wrote back to Ferns from Ottawa, adopting a mock version of the tendentious tone used in letters between Mackenzie King and his friend (Ferns and Ostry thought lover) Bert Harper. "Oh Rex do you know how much I have longed for you," Ostry wrote. "... as I look out of my hotel window across the locks to Parliament Hill and gaze at Canada's greatest erection rising from the white snow surrounding it, I realize that it is a symbol pointing in the wrong direction. For while it has grown grey and old, blacking out the sun these many generations it should more rightly be pointed toward the snows for it has played a role, not of penetrating the heavens but of defiling the purity of Canada's virgin children."²⁹

The seeds of later troubles may have been here, in the sexual reference. Not that it was a love spat; it was more complicated even than that. It was the competition between two men – one older, senior, responsible and married with children. This was Ferns, the man with the academic position, who actually wrote the book but who was left to sit in Birmingham while his younger, richer, good looking colleague travelled back and forth between old world and new, cavorting with the rich and prominent, the journalists and political hacks, gathering information and raising publicity. Ferns didn't always get Ostry, though sometimes his not getting him could be amusing. In March of 1954, when it seemed like the book was set to come out later that year, Ferns received a telegram that read: "We are in. Flynn." Apparently Ferns wasn't familiar with the expression. He wrote to ask Ostry if he had sent the telegram. "I told the boy [who brought the telegram] I didn't know anyone named Flynn. It has occurred to me since that perhaps this had something to do with the fact that Heinemann's were willing to do business and that the phrase "We are in" employed by a man used to much fucking probably is the equivalent of an announcement of success, while Flynn obviously is the first part of the

29. LAC, HSFF, MG 32, G 16, Box 6 file 6, [Bernard Ostry] to [H. S. Ferns], 25 January 1954. The letter shows the Ostry/Ferns correspondence in its most jocular form, in a way that suggests how little reflection there was in the period of the disturbing connections between matters of sexuality, power and age. See, for example, Steven Maynard, "The Maple Leaf (Gardens) Forever: Canadian Historians and National History," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 36 (Summer 2001), 70–105.

home town which he also loves. It's all very Joycean if in fact you did send the telegram."³⁰

The real kicker, though, came in a May 1954 newspaper article by Patrick Nicholson, a journalist friend of Ostry's. The article alerted Canadians to a forthcoming biography on Mackenzie King written by Bernard Ostry, promoted to Professor for the occasion no less. There was no mention of a coauthor, no mention of Ferns. It wasn't the last time a journalist would make this mistake.³¹

From this point onward, conversations about publicity and the relative status of the two authors percolated through their correspondence. Relatively mundane issues were anything but simple. Whose name would appear first on the title page? How long would the biographies be that they sent to the press? Who had last spoken to Alan Hill and what arrangements would be made? Who had final say over revisions to the proofs?

Ferns claimed that all he wanted from the book was money. It is certainly true that he did want this, and an indication of another difference between the two men. Ferns needed the money; Ostry did not.³² It was hardly true, however, that it was all about money. It was also about Brooke Claxton, Jack Pickersgill and others in the Liberal establishment. His anger at these men turned a few short paragraphs about himself on the book's dust jacket into a weapon of vindication. "I have been lied about for 15 years, and I do not propose to pass up an opportunity to place on record in public exactly who I am and what I have done," he explained to Ostry. "When Pickersgill says, as he has in the past, that I am a second rate crank and spy I wish to put him in the position of being obliged to say it about someone who in every objective test of ability revealed himself superior to J.W.P." This is why it was so important that he be seen as an equal author of the book, and that it not be seen as a work of political hacks. Ferns wanted his academic status front and centre. He wanted it known that "I batted in the big leagues along with Pickersgill et al. and that I got a home run when all they could do was get a base on balls."³³

The breaking point came in February 1955. Their publisher Alan Hill was seeking yet more revisions to the manuscript, going back and forth between Ferns and Ostry, playing them off against each other, trying to find some way

30. CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 155, file 1157, H. S. Ferns to Bernard Ostry, 23 March [1954].

31. Ferns' immediate response to the incident is in CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 155, file 1157, H. S. Ferns to Bernard Ostry, 31 May [1954].

32. CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 155, file 1157, H. S. Ferns to Bernard Ostry, 31 May [1954]. On their respective financial situations, see CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 158, file 1279, Bernard Ostry to [his father], 29 January 1954; LAC, HSPF, MG 32, G 16, Box 6 file 6, H. S. Ferns to Ann Orford, 11 November 1955.

33. CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 155, file 1157, H. S. Ferns to Bernard Ostry, 31 May [1954] and H. S. Ferns to Bernard Ostry, n.d. [Saturday].

to get the two obstinate men to get each other to agree to the changes. They all met in London in Hill's office. Ferns thought that he was being the reasonable one, that he was there to, in a friendly way, bring Ostry onside. But then Hill let him know the extent and kind of changes that he wanted to make. They struck to what Ferns saw as the heart of the book. This was Mackenzie King's involvement in the "Ludlow massacre," where hired gunmen were brought in to break up a strike between a radical coal miners union and a company owned by Rockefeller interests. For Ferns, the Rockefellers hired Mackenzie King as a labour adviser to come in and whitewash their involvement in the incident. King was the hired hand of American capital, the smooth talker used to make things look fine on the surface, to set up a company union and to undermine the real needs of the workers. Here, Ferns thought, was the most direct evidence that King was anything but the friend of labour he professed to be.

Hill had received yet another report on the book claiming that this section needed to be toned down. This was too much for Ferns. Even worse, Ostry seemed to give in to Hill. Ferns stormed out of the office. If this is what they wanted, he would back out of the project. All future revisions could be handled by Ostry. But he also reserved the right to remove his name from the cover if they made any further revisions which went against the spirit of the original draft.³⁴

He and Ostry continued to communicate over the course of 1955 but the letters were tense. Ferns claimed to want to patch things up. He kept asking Ostry to come up to Birmingham so they could have a "frank" conversation. If they were going to collaborate on future volumes, which looked almost impossible as things stood, they would need to meet. Ostry kept having other things to do. Ferns offered to come up to London just before Ostry was to leave for Canada in August of 1955. The book was scheduled to come out later in the autumn. This might be the last time for them to see each other before it came out. Ostry said no. It was too late. He had too much to do. The sign that things had changed, though, had come earlier. One day the letters they wrote changed ever so slightly. Gone was the endearing "Love from all, Harry": in its place, "Sincerely, Harry Ferns."³⁵



DESPITE THE MANY DELAYS and the troubles between its authors, *The Age of Mackenzie King* did finally arrive in Canadian bookstores on 4 December 1955

34. On this meeting, see CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 155, file 1157, H. S. Ferns to Bernard Ostry, 11 February 1955; CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 155, file 1172, H. S. Ferns to Bernard Ostry, 11 February 1955; CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 155, file 1157, H. S. Ferns to Alan Hill [copy to Bernard Ostry], 27 February 1955 and H. S. Ferns to Bernard Ostry, 27 February 1955.

35. CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 155, file 1157, H. S. Ferns to Bernard Ostry, n.d. [c Jan–Feb 1955].

in time for Christmas shopping. British Books predicted strong sales. The last King biography, Hutchison's *The Incredible Canadian*, had been a best-seller. *The Age of Mackenzie King* was a different kind of book, certainly, but it too could find its place. A friend of Bernie's wrote in late November to ask when the book was coming out. He may have been doing some friendly exaggerating when he said that "Everybody's been hanging around the bookstores waiting to grab the first copies," but the book was certainly hotly anticipated. Leonard Brockington wrote to Harry telling him that "there is a great demand for [the book] in Ottawa. Grattan O'Leary told me a couple of days ago that [the Ottawa bookseller] Hope's sold seventy in one afternoon."

The Age of Mackenzie King presented Canadians with a controversial version of Mackenzie King. Ferns and Ostry wanted to get to the "truth" of Mackenzie King, to give a version of King that went behind the myth the Liberals had created for him. Theirs was a work of demystification. They did this in a witty, sarcastic manner which was itself out of keeping with the stately volumes one usually expected for the biographies of great men. There were few Lytton Stracheys in Canada, and even fewer were wanted by those with vested interests in the reputations of the great and good. Not that Ferns and Ostry were modern day Stracheys, not exactly. They were, despite themselves, too earnest for that. But the chapter titles did convey their biting critique, each with its own *double entendre*: "Working on the Railroad Workers," "For Hire," "The Powerful and the Glory." The main thrust of the book was to present King as someone who was an expert manipulator. They admitted that King had incredible skill and foresight. He had, they claimed, discovered the importance of class relations to Canadian politics before any other mainstream politician. He had recognized the changing landscape around him as he grew up and watched Canada become an industrial nation. They even provocatively compared him to Lenin, noting that both shared the same view that the class struggle was at the heart of a new version of politics in industrial capitalist societies.

Mackenzie King, however, came to very different conclusions from Lenin as to what was to be done. This was the hallmark King idea of conciliation that he had trumpeted so successfully in his work for the new Department of Labour and when he had become a Minister of Labour. It was the idea he had taken with him in his work with the Rockefellers, the idea he had so extensively written about in *Industry and Humanity* and it was the idea he had used to ride to power in 1919 at the Liberal leadership convention, as a new man with fresh but safe answers for a modern age. Ferns and Ostry pointed to all of the holes in King's application of this and other similarly, as they saw it, muddled ideas. They showed how in strike after strike where King was called in to conciliate he actually worked against the real interests of working people. His attempt to find the soft compromise sapped the power of workers whose only real power came from the threat of industrial conflict. Similarly, they pointed out that when King was called in to deal with the "Oriental problem" in British

Columbia, his high sounding language of compromise actually masked and justified racist immigration policies.

A friend wrote to Ostry in January 1956 to say that their book had “really jolted many Canadians. It is one of the most discussed books since its appearance on the bookstands. It has shocked many people who have even remotely been associated with King. Many people don’t deny the truth of its portrayal of King but the reaction seems to be disapproval that these truths are written for everyone to read.”³⁶ This was an intelligent response from a sympathetic observer who struck the heart of how many Canadians seemed to feel about the book.

The more common response was to overlook the details and simply say that the biography was no biography at all. This was the Liberal and, to a certain extent, common-sense response. The other prime ministerial biography on bookshelves that Christmas was the second volume of Donald Creighton’s John A Macdonald. In an unparalleled literary style, Creighton brought Macdonald to life as few biographers have ever done of any Canadian subject. He tried to capture Macdonald the man and the politician. There were certainly gaps in his approach, and the biography had a politics to it, but this wasn’t obvious on the surface. Against this, and dealing with a more recent period in which many of the protagonists were still alive and the partisan lines still clearly drawn, Ferns and Ostry didn’t stand a chance.

The review by Charles Bruce, republished in more than a dozen papers across the country, was typical. He argued that the book “loses impact, for the reader interested in objective fact, by reason of the sarcasm with which the authors have seen fit to treat not only their central subject but nearly everyone else.” Alan Morley in the *Vancouver Province* complained that “In the five years since his [Mackenzie King’s] death he has been “debunked” more ruthlessly than has any modern leader of comparable stature.” This, it seemed, is what Ferns and Ostry were offering – more criticism and from a radical left perspective. “While they nowhere state the standards against which they judge Mr. King,” Morley went on, “what they do regard as an unchallengeable moral code is nothing more or less than the economic-political dogma of the Socialist intellectuals of the British Labor Party.” *Canadian Business* agreed, noting that the authors “are apt to do more to obscure the man’s real character and stature than anything else unless they are soon counteracted by a more objective study.” As an example of what was wrong with the book, the reviewer exclaimed that “There is more than a suggestion that the authors scorn Mr. King’s advocacy of conciliation in labor disputes because they believe labor disputes should be heated up rather than cooled down.” This, of course, is exactly what Ferns and Ostry argued in the book, so the review was

36. CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 157, file 1235, Janet Skelton to Bernard Ostry, 19 January [1956]. Another account of how the Canadian reluctance to challenge authority affected response to the book is LAC, HSEF, MG 32 G 16, Box 6, file 6, Tanis and Michael to H. S. Ferns, 10 December 1955.

at least honest if politically opposed. The *Winnipeg Tribune* found fault on more humanistic grounds, suggesting that the book couldn't get at the man himself. The early part of the book presented King "in an uncharitable spirit" the reviewer claimed. Worse, "King is presented as resembling a crypto-fascist." Ultimately, the main problem was that "One side of King's personality is revealed in this book, but the man himself, the "poor naked fork'd thing" is not discovered. This is not biography, but dissection."³⁷

The most vitriolic attack came from the Liberal Grant Dexter at the *Winnipeg Free Press*. Dexter called the book a work of "unqualified denigration." "It is doubtful," Dexter predicted hopefully, "if this book will have any wide audience in this country. It will be plain to every reader ... that the authors are so obsessed by their antagonism to King that they cannot be objective." Dexter linked King to the nation itself. What would it say about Canada and Canadians if Ferns and Ostry's version of King were true? Some might be anxious about this but Dexter was contemptuous. It simply couldn't be true, for this very simple reason: "... as everyone will agree, no small conniving, selfish man could ever be the prime minister of this country for more than 20 years.... No one could fool the people so long."³⁸ Could they?

The Tory press chewed only the morsels it found tasty. Grattan O'Leary of the *Ottawa Journal* skipped the Marxist analysis and went straight for the Liberal jugular. The most shocking revelation, from a Tory standpoint, came in the letter that Ferns and Ostry had discovered written by Mackenzie King to then American Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan in 1914. In it, King seems to be urging the Americans to maintain their neutrality in the early months of the war and to deny war loans to aid France. In other words, it seemed to show King working against the interests of Britain and Canada in the Great War. It was one thing for King not to have served during the Great War, something some Tories held against him, but for King to have advocated American neutrality was a spectacular revelation. "It is tremendous to speculate," O'Leary declaimed, "upon what might have happened to Mr. King's subsequent political fortunes and to the whole course of Canada's political history had this letter become public."³⁹

There were other similar allegations that reverberated in mid 1950s Canada. Ferns and Ostry alleged that King had not been Laurier's choice as Liberal leader as was sometimes claimed. They also alleged that King had flirted with

37. Charles Bruce, "Review Mackenzie King's Early Life," *The Daily News* [St Johns, Nfld], 16 December 1955; Alan Morley, "Mackenzie King - the debunkers march again," *Vancouver Province*, 30 December 1955; "Pre-Conceived Ideas," *Canadian Business*, February 1956; "W.L.M. King - Flat," *The Winnipeg Tribune*, 24 December 1955.

38. Grant Dexter, "Distorted Image," *Winnipeg Free Press*, 14 January 1956. See also "Pre-Conceived Ideas," *Canadian Business*, February 1956.

39. Grattan O'Leary, "An Historical Letter: Bared in New King Biography," *Ottawa Journal*, December 1955.

joining the Union government during the war, abandoning Laurier and thus disproving the loyalty to Laurier which had been such a huge factor in King's winning the Liberal leadership in 1919. Ostry himself knew that these were the features of the book that would "sell" to the mainstream in 1955 and he highlighted them when he spoke to the press. He certainly got O'Leary's attention. "Some will say that authors Ferns and Ostrey [sic] fail in objectivity, that they are too much the able prosecutors with a criminal in the dock," O'Leary noted. "The claim will not lack wholly invalidity; yet if this volume is more an essay in impeachment than an objective biography, at least it can be said for it that its selected facts, arrayed often with scorn and satire, and perhaps a touch of malice, are documented adequately; that the writers state clearly what their evidence is and where it can be found."⁴⁰

That might have been the end of *The Age of Mackenzie King*. The book sold more than two thousand copies in the few weeks before Christmas. This was a great start, but after that, sales fell off. The reasons for the sudden stop are unclear. It may simply have been the post-Christmas lull. It may have been the relatively, though not uniformly, bad reviews. It might, though, have been something else.

Friends of Ferns and Ostry wrote to say that they couldn't get the book. A department store in Montreal claimed that it was sold out and that it would take three weeks to order a copy. The clerk seemed reluctant to put in an order. The book had been in store windows before Christmas; now it was nowhere to be seen. Ferns didn't know what to think but he remained suspicious. His suspicions were heightened by his dealings with *Saturday Night*. The magazine commissioned him to do an article on the book and Mackenzie King. They sent him a cheque for \$75 and he sent them the article. It never appeared. Later in the spring, the editor wrote to say that there hadn't been space for his article, and that it had by this point lost its "topicality" anyway. Ferns could, though, keep the cheque.⁴¹

Was someone attempting to suppress their book? Did the Liberal establishment have that kind of weight? Ferns thought so, but he also didn't want to push the matter overly far. For Ferns, the important thing was to maintain his sense of scholarly dignity. His reading of Canadian society in these years was that controversy would kill the book. They had to present themselves as objective scholars. Ostry was a different man and his approach differed in kind. Ostry had returned to London by the time their book had been released in

40. Grattan O'Leary, "An Historical Letter," *Ottawa Journal*, December 1955.

41. On Ferns' suspicions, see LAC, HSFF, MG 32, G 16, Box 2, file 1, H. S. Ferns to Grattan O'Leary, 10 August 1956. A contrary picture is LAC, HSFF, MG 32, G 16, Box 6, file 6, J. Ferns to H. S. Ferns, 7 March 1956. For the *Saturday Night* episode, see LAC, HSFF, MG 32, G 16, Box 8, file "Crsp 1954-1957," Charles Gwyn Kinsey to H. S. Ferns, 5 January 1956 and Herbert McManus to H. S. Ferns, 23 February 1956; The William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections, McMaster University (hereafter WRDA), W. L. Morton fonds (hereafter WLMF), Box 9, File "H. S. Ferns," H. S. Ferns to W. L. Morton, 21 January 1956.



Brooke Claxton (1949):
“Under our system
McCarthy had no place
to go and as I say I never
heard of an unjust result.”

Credit: Brooke Claxton,
Library and Archives Canada,
accession number 1969-031,
C-071163.

Canada. But he was heading back to Canada at the end of January 1956, and he planned to make an immediate impression.



BROOKE CLAXTON LIKED TO READ. In early December of 1955 the recently retired Liberal cabinet minister had just read *A Democrat Looks at His Party* by his friend, the former American Secretary of State, Dean Acheson. It inspired Claxton to dash off a long letter to Acheson about the different ways that Canadians and Americans had treated civil servants considered to be “security concerns” in the early years of the Cold War – people like Harry Ferns. Claxton extolled the Canadian method, which was a quiet method, a Liberal method. This was the system under which there was no public trial or denunciations. All was handled quietly, as Ferns found out in that brief letter telling him that his services were no longer considered acceptable. Claxton wrote, somewhat prematurely: “I never heard of a case where something turned up later to show that the action we had taken had been wrong.... it

was the publicity given to your cases ... which created the turmoil. Under our system McCarthy had no place to go and as I say I never heard of an unjust result."⁴²

A few days later Claxton read *The Age of Mackenzie King*. It's not clear how much he remembered of Harry Ferns or their brief altercation in 1949. Claxton did, though, have strong feelings about his and Ostry's book. "Almost worse than its malicious distortions of everything having to do with Mr. King," he wrote privately, "is the tiresome emission of communist venom on every page." The book was "nauseating" and Claxton had to "struggle hard to keep on with the exercise" of reading it. What effect, he wondered, would this have on King's reputation? What effect would it have on the party? At the club during the holidays, three out of a total of six at his table were reading the book. True, the others had "agreed that it was self-condemning but would this be the view generally held by the less enlightened people who have not the good fortune to live in Ottawa?"⁴³

Claxton considered his options. "The thought occurred to me," he wrote to Jack Pickersgill, "that it would not be a bad thing if quite a few people across Canada sent letters ... to the newspapers. That, however, would start a controversy. The best thing to do is to let the matter die. Most effective of all would be not to buy or read the book." This latter really would be best if only it could be accomplished. "Neither the authors nor the publishers should be given the satisfaction of having the book purchased or read," he wrote to an academic at Queen's. But would it be possible? How could you silence a book? How best to ensure that it faded into obscurity?⁴⁴

The telephone call from the CBC came as an affront. He didn't know the man, for one, which was simply poor style on their part. The proposition itself was ludicrous. The CBC was planning to run a panel discussion program on the new book by Ferns and Ostry. The format would be simple. One of the authors had already recorded a five minute spot in which he outlined the main themes of the book. Then a panel of four or five King experts, a mixture of academics and politicians, would review the book. As someone with such an intimate knowledge of Mr. King and with so much political experience himself, would he be kind enough to participate? Thank you but no, he had said. He had said a great deal more, and not politely. He shouted so loudly that, the small size of the telephone receiver and the distance between Ottawa and Toronto not-

42. LAC, Brooke Claxton fonds (hereafter BCF), MG32, B5, vol. 71, file "Dean Acheson," Brooke Claxton to Dean Acheson, 7 December 1955.

43. LAC, BCF, MG32, B5, vol. 83, file "J. W. Pickersgill," Brooke Claxton to J. W. Pickersgill, 29 December 1955.

44. LAC, BCF, MG32, B5, vol. 83, file "J. W. Pickersgill," Brooke Claxton to J. W. Pickersgill, 29 December 1955; LAC, BCF, MG32, B5, vol. 72, file "C Miscellaneous," Brooke Claxton to J. A. Corry, 16 January 1956.

withstanding, he hoped that everyone at the CBC had heard him. They knew how he felt.

Even still, he “could not conceive of Dave passing on this.” Dave was Davidson Dunton, the Chairman of the CBC. He was also a good friend and neighbour of Brooke Claxton, one of his friends from the “Club.” Ottawa was small and the club circuit even smaller. What was Davie thinking? Luckily he ran into him later that day and asked him the very same thing. It seems that Dunton hadn’t heard of the project. The CBC was a big operation and he couldn’t be aware of every little detail. Dunton had promised to keep his eyes out. Claxton later found out that the project came across Dunton’s desk the very next day. Dunton killed the program. Despite the pre-billing, there would be no CBC discussion program on *The Age of Mackenzie King*. For someone like Claxton and no doubt for Dunton, it made sense. The book just wasn’t worth it. As far as Claxton was concerned, and possibly Dunton too, that was the end of it.⁴⁵

They didn’t know Bernard Ostry.

Ostry arrived in Canada at the end of January. He wanted a way to get the book back in the headlines and the CBC cancellation was the issue he would use. His time making friends over the last two years was also about to pay off. Sensing a chance to score political points against the Liberal government, Ostry’s friends and contacts came to his aid.

In early February the CCF MP H. A. Bryson stood up in the House. “Why,” he asked, “was the discussion on the book ‘The Age of Mackenzie King’ cancelled by the C.B.C.?” This was the little pebble that started an avalanche of criticism over the course of the next month.⁴⁶ Donald Fleming, the Tory critic for public broadcasting and later finance minister, picked up the cancellation of one little program and turned it into a story about government monopoly of television and radio. This was what happened when you had public bodies like the CBC. “To say the least,” Fleming commented in the House, “the book was not complimentary to the late Mr. Mackenzie King or to the record of the Liberal party.” Who would benefit from cancelling the program, Fleming asked. Surely, it could only be the government. This left Fleming with two possible interpretations. Either someone in the government deliberately cancelled the program or someone in the CBC cancelled the program on the government’s behalf, fearing government anger. The latter would almost be worse.

“Can the minister inform me what medium the C.B.C. will use to review the book on Mackenzie King?” asked the CCF MP Alistair Stewart. Many of the papers picked up on this jibe; nothing else needed to be said, as everyone knew of King’s interest in spiritualism. Pickersgill managed to ensure that the

45. Some of Claxton’s involvement in the cancellation was published in newspapers. Claxton privately admitted his own involvement, though seeing nothing wrong with his actions, in a letter to his brother-in-law, LAC, BCF, MG32, B5, vol. 81, file “T. W. L. MacDermot,” Brooke Claxton to T. W. L. MacDermot, 28 March 1956.

46. Canada, *House of Commons Debates* (6 February 1956), 881 (Hon H. A. Bryson, MP).

opposition did not get all of the fun. When Fleming asked why the CBC had cancelled the program he shouted out, "They probably read the book."⁴⁷

The papers that could be expected to become irate did so – notably the *Telegram* whose editor Ostry met with. But so too did some papers that didn't like the book itself but who disbelieved the government's explanation of the cancellation – that the book "did not merit" television treatment. The Saskatoon *Star Phoenix* set the tone demanding that "Canadian taxpayers should be informed and soon, exactly why the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation cancelled two carefully prepared and scheduled programs which were to deal with a supposedly controversial biography of the late Prime Minister Mackenzie King." So far, it claimed, the government answers had been "exceedingly woolly and confusing" and the public could "hardly fail to suspect the worst." Ann Orford of British Books stirred things up by writing a public letter that was published in a number of papers. Orford gave Ostry's account of the cancellation and claimed to be concerned about this "matter which might appear to be a violation of or interference with one of the fundamental democratic freedoms."⁴⁸

Grant Dexter spoke for the Liberal press when, under the heading "No Ostry-cism," he claimed: "It seems difficult to establish that democratic freedom involves a right to have a book discussed on a television program." A few weeks later, when the issue refused to go away from newspaper headlines, Dexter returned to the Liberal's defence. "Nobody has questioned the rightness of the decision not to proceed with the broadcast," he claimed, showing perhaps just what a small circle of acquaintances he had. "It is pretty well agreed that there was no case for a CBC program."

Then Dexter set about giving the background to the story, telling how Claxton had been asked to be on the program and had angrily refused. But more importantly, Dexter claimed, "Mr. Dunton, the chairman of the Board of Governors of the CBC, had just finished reading the book and had reached the same conclusion as Mr. Claxton. After consultation with his colleagues, the review of the book was cancelled." Dexter ended the story claiming that "The most careful inquiry [the one he had just done] indicates that there was no political interference." Blair Fraser of *Maclean's* agreed. The main point was, he claimed, that "No member of the government had anything to do with the cancellation of that program project." This was an important technicality. It may have been true that Claxton was prominent in Liberal circles, that he was looked to for advice, and that in the next election he would take a lead

47. Canada, *House of Commons Debates* (7 February 1956) 911, 945–948 (Hon. Alistair Stewart, MP; Hon. Donald Fleming, MP; Hon. Jack Pickersgill, MP).

48. "Explanation Required," *Saskatoon Star Phoenix*, 9 February 1956. Orford's letter appeared in various papers including *The Gazette* [Montreal], 9 February 1956; *The Hamilton Speculator*, 8 February 1956; *The Daily Packet and Times* [Orillia], 8 February 1956.

role in shaping the future of the party, but he wasn't technically part of the government.⁴⁹

The CBC knew of the disapproval of an important Liberal former Cabinet Minister. This man was good friends with the Chairman of the CBC and had voiced his displeasure loudly. But responsible journalism in the 1950s noted that the CBC acted on its own. One might have speculated about the friendships that crossed boundaries when these men dined at their clubs. One might have speculated about the forming of a consensus, rooted in a single political way of seeing the world, in which it became common sense to decide that *The Age of Mackenzie King* "did not merit" public discussion. But Fraser, Dexter and other Liberals didn't believe such wild accusations. They hoped the "less enlightened people" wouldn't either.



THE SCANDAL HAD BEEN TOO MUCH for Harry Ferns. The final straw was when Ostry was quoted in the *Financial Times* boasting "My next volume will be much stronger. I have in it a lot about people who are still living. There will also be a tale of corruption the like of which never occurred in Canada since the Pacific scandal." Ferns hadn't even known about the CBC program, let alone its cancellation. Now Ostry was busy creating more scandal, and dragging the name of Harry Ferns in the mud in the process. On 29 February he wrote to the *Financial Times* to publicly disassociate himself from statements made by Ostry. On 20 April Ferns went further and released to the press a statement in which he dissociated himself entirely from Ostry. "There will be no further volumes of *The Age of Mackenzie King*," he wrote. "I am satisfied that there is insufficient evidence available to the public at the present time to write a truthful and adequate account of Mackenzie King's life going beyond the year 1919." When Ostry wrote his own public letter, vowing to continue the biography on his own, Ferns responded with more than a trace of sarcasm. He claimed to be "delighted" that his former coauthor would carry on to write his own book: "Such an enterprise will be a new and valuable experience for Mr Ostry..."⁵⁰

In the short run, it was all heart-warming for Canada's Liberals. The *Winnipeg Free Press* couldn't help but comment that "Mr. Ferns thus appears to

49. "No Ostry-cism," *Winnipeg Free Press*, 11 February 1956; Grant Dexter, "CBC Story," *Winnipeg Free Press*, 25 February 1956; Blair Fraser, "Why the CBC shunned the King story," *Maclean's*, 31 March 1956.

50. LAC, HSF, MG 32, G 16, vol 6, file "Ostry," H. S. Ferns to Bernard Ostry, 30 March 1956 and [Press Statement] 20 April 1956; CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 157, file 1243, Bernard Ostry, Letter to the Editor, *The Times* [London], 27 April 1956; LAC, HSF, MG 32, G 16, vol. 6, file "Ostry," [Press Statement] 28 April 1956.

have written an advance review of Mr. Ostry's next book."⁵¹ Later that year, however, in the midst of the Pipeline debate, scandal once again rocked the Liberal government. By the end of 1956 some were suggesting that the Liberal reign might be coming to an end. The 1957 election victory by the Progressive Conservatives under John Diefenbaker proved this correct. A year later, Diefenbaker's stunning majority victory decisively finished Liberal rule in Ottawa.⁵²

"Oh what a wonderful morning! Oh what a beautiful day!" Harry Ferns wrote to W. L. Morton. "We are throwing a gloating party this evening.... But I wish I were home and in a situation where I could lead a storming party on Brooke Claxton's penthouse ... and chase him in his underwear into the Convent of the Sacred heart." Ferns, at least, thought that he shared in the victory. "It is a great satisfaction to me to know that I wrote a book which hit the Liberals hard," he wrote. The age of Mackenzie King had finally come to an end.⁵³



TWO DECADES LATER, IN 1976, *The Age of Mackenzie King* was back in bookstores in a new edition. Much had changed in the intervening years. Pierre Trudeau, a man who, like Ostry, had been a wealthy, politically interested, leftwing figure with enough gumption to live a morally and ideologically independent life in the 1950s, was now Prime Minister. Ostry himself was close by his friend the new prime minister, working at the rank of deputy minister in his post as Secretary-General of the National Museums of Canada. His wife, Sylvia, was even more prominent as head of Statistics Canada. The Ostrys had become such a part of the Ottawa establishment that a *Macleans* journalist wrote to him in 1967 asking if she could publish a picture of the Ostrys' annual party in the magazine. "My feeling is," she wrote, "that you and Sylvia (and a great many of our mutual friends) belong to a new Ottawa, that slowly, as with everything else in this country, the city is coming out from under the grip of a hidebound Establishment."⁵⁴

How much exactly had changed from the old Ottawa would, of course, be a matter of interpretation. To the younger generation who sought more radical political and sexual reform, the Ostrys might have simply seemed to be a new Establishment. Yet their position as a Jewish couple, with a radical political history, atop liberal (and Liberal) Ottawa did reflect a change.

51. "Advance Review," *Winnipeg Free Press*, 10 May 1956.

52. On the fall of Liberals, Robert Bothwell, Ian Drummond and John English, *Canada Since 1945: Power, Politics, and Provincialism* Rev. ed. (Toronto 1989), 177–180.

53. WRDA, WLME, Box 9, File "H. S. Ferns," H.S. Ferns to W. L. Morton, 11 June 1957.

54. CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 158, file 1292, Christina [no surname] to Bernard Ostry, 3 November 1967.

The place of Mackenzie King in Canada of the 1970s was also radically different. Most of King's old defenders were now either dead or retired. The legacy of Mackenzie King was no longer synonymous with Liberal political fortunes. His literary executors were still at work, although two had died and been replaced. Most importantly, they had decided in the early 1970s to release the full text of King's diary – and hence the full private world of Mackenzie King – to the public. From 1972 onward, each year the archives released another set of the King diaries creating an annual Mackenzie King circus as more and more revelations emerged. Canadians didn't seem to tire of learning about his odd exploits. Earlier in the summer of 1976 Charles Stacey's best-selling *A Very Double Life* had poked into the private worlds of King and his relations with his mother, prostitutes and the spirit-world. The final volume of the official biography also appeared that year, written by H. Blair Neatby, and even this official tome was a much more searing take on King than anyone would have anticipated in the 1950s.

Perhaps most importantly, *The Age of Mackenzie King* came into a post-Watergate world. The scandal of their book, the fact that the CBC had cancelled a discussion program about it and that it briefly made headlines, made it an attractive and even "sexy" sell in the mid 1970s. Far from the world of respectable Canadian politics in the mid 1950s where controversy was to be avoided at all costs, this time the controversy is what would sell the book. Reviewers revelled in exposing how the times had changed and how this book could now be published where it had at one time been smothered and hushed up in the repressive climate of the 1950s. The reviewers fell over themselves to castigate the old official Liberal Ottawa, and to deride King's literary executors and official biographers as the "fudge factory." There had been a "conspiracy" to keep the truth of King from Canadians. This was one of the books that had dared to speak truth to power.⁵⁵

This time, too, Bernard Ostry left nothing to chance. In 1955 he had charmed his way into the lives of the old and established with remarkable success but he was still a newcomer. His closest friends in Ottawa were junior MPs and political staffers. This time he arranged for promotional quotes, reviews and essays by some of the leading journalists and academics in the country: Peter Newman, George Grant, Larry Zolf, John Gray, Dalton Camp, Donald Creighton, W. L. Morton, Kildare Dobbs and others. Ostry wrote to Mordecai Richler to get him to work on his friends at the Book-of-the-Month Club. He encouraged Hugh Segal, then working for the premier of Ontario, to have the book considered for use in schools. The sales were not incredible, although at least as respectable as the first time around. The public reception in the media, though, was entirely different and decidedly warmer.

55. Dalton Camp, "Liberals shielded Mackenzie King from biographers," *Toronto Star*, 5 November 1976; Heather Robertson, "Chills," *Saturday Night* (November 1976), 39–40.

Some things, though, hadn't changed. Harry Ferns and Bernard Ostry were speaking again but it wasn't going to be easy. They had both changed. Ferns was no longer the aspiring left wing academic – far from it. He was happy to have the book back in print and managed to get on with Bernie Ostry reasonably well. But when Ostry impulsively suggested that they write a long delayed second volume, Ferns took on directly from where he had left off more than two decades ago. He said he would “think it over.” “I do not want to be cast in the role of an academic dogsbody,” he insisted, “I am willing to help you get whatever it is you want to get out of writing about Mackenzie King, provided you are able to accept me and respect me publicly and privately for what I have demonstrated myself to be, vis. an able, independent writer of good books ... I still think F comes before O in the alphabet.” When the Lorimer catalogue incorrectly publicised Ferns as lecturing at the University of Birmingham and not as a professor, Ferns took Lorimer to task. “... [I]t is particularly important to me,” he emphasised, “to assert that I *have* made a good career in the United Kingdom.... The fact that I have “made it” in an intellectually tougher and more competitive community than Canada is a commentary not only on me but upon Canada and the Canadians who treated me with such contempt and sought like one of them said to “run that bastard out of town.” And without bragging about it and in a modest and brief way, I want to assert that commentary.”⁵⁶

Harry Ferns was and wasn't the same man. Clearly the past still haunted him, his treatment at the hands of Canada's Liberal establishment. He had fared better in Diefenbaker's Canada, even becoming a somewhat regular commentator in the British and Canadian media in the 1960s. But the changing times were also changing Harry Ferns. He recoiled from the changes that were putting Ostry into the new establishment and setting up a new brand of radical youth on his university campus. Ferns also witnessed the dark side of the welfare state and class conflict in a post-imperial Britain in decline where the struggles between unions and the state were much more divisive than in Canada. It was not a transformation he appreciated.

He moved steadily rightward in his own quixotic fashion. In 1957 he had cheered Diefenbaker. By 1968 he put himself at the head of a group of right-wing dissidents who established the first and only private university in the UK, University College at Buckingham. “It seems to us important,” he wrote on the group's behalf, “that there should be kept alive in Britain the idea and practice of personal independence and of doing things for oneself without having the cost of one's activities paid for by the government.”⁵⁷

56. CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 20, file 138, Harry Ferns to Bernard Ostry, 2 December 1976 and Harry Ferns to James Lorimer, 3 November 1976.

57. LAC, HSF, MG 32, G 16, Box 7, file “indep university,” H. S. Ferns to Fred Morris, 4 May 1972; CTA, BOF, F0370, 1991-030, vol. 20, file 138, Harry Ferns to Bernard Ostry, 2 December 1976.

When Ostry asked him to work on another volume on King, Ferns was already at work on a book called *The Road Back From Serfdom*. In it he attacked what he called “bureaucratic socialism” by which he meant the rigid society of control that had been established, he claimed, by the rising power of the state over everyday life. His socialist roots were still evident but in a distorted fashion. He was still a supporter of the “people” but he preferred now to talk about “producers,” a group which included businessmen alongside workers. The common enemy were those unproductive elements of society, the hangers-on, civil servants, the folk like Mackenzie King and Jack Pickersgill who had earned their living on the public teat. He had never been a Liberal. He had never liked middle ways.

In other words, two decades on, when *The Age of Mackenzie King* was finally published to much approval, and when Canada had finally caught up to where Harry Ferns and Bernie Ostry had been in 1955, Harry Ferns had already moved on. Once again, Ferns was on to something. His new vision would take shape after 1979, in the neoconservatism and anti-Sixties backlash that would follow the victory of Margaret Thatcher. Ferns certainly had a knack for being ahead of his time.

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