

Pitt, David G. E. J. *Pratt: The Truant Years 1882-1927.*

F. L. Jackson

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These writings do exist, and await the attention of a future biographer.

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E. J. Pratt: The Truant Years 1882-1927. David G. Pitt. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1984; St. John's: Jespersion Press, 1984. 415 p. \$24.95 (c), \$14.95 (p).

F. L. JACKSON

Biography is at its worst when it only gossips about the great or notorious. The work of sycophants who find genius even in the most trivial banalities of their heroes' lives is little better. The critical biography, again, all too often betrays some pedant's desire to get the better of the hero by revealing his feet of clay; regarding which we may observe with Hegel that if the hero is no hero to his valet, it is not because there are no heroes but because a valet is a valet.

In the biographical service he performs on behalf of his hero E. J. Pratt, David Pitt is neither gossip, lackey nor valet. The poet we encounter in the pages of this first volume of the projected two-volume biography leads no secret life; he is no Beerbohm caricature of artsy sophistication, no viking Übermensch imprisoned among the maple leaves. On the contrary, he is the very model of a modern college lecturer. He likes his job and weekends at the cottage. He enjoys movies and plays golf with the Toronto bourgeoisie. He is human, all too human: a fine poetic mind inhabiting an extraordinarily conventional body.

What is admirable about Pitt's study is just its faithfulness to the prosaic authenticity of Pratt's life. There is absolutely no effort to make him over into a Byronic demigod; Pitt is even gently critical of the poet's well-known penchant for autobiographical hyperbole. By sticking to the unvarnished narrative, however, Pitt is far from diminishing his subject in our eyes or compromising his genius. Rather the author succeeds in communicating a common truth unpopular among the literati: that manifest peculiarity and exceptionality of life are, frequently, hallmarks of pretentious fakers; true genius is often more modest and quite at home in unaffected souls.

Were it not so, how could our interest be sustained in the offspring of an obscure Newfoundland manse, in siblings Cal or Floss, in cats, boarding houses, train trips? What is it to us that a sometime draper's clerk, teacher, and travelling salesman should seek eventually to qualify for a clerical collar

in “Toronto the Good”? In pre-Confederation Newfoundland it was the common route for the few who sought a higher education. And how many young small-town theologs in those days discovered on arrival at the big universities that Wesley was already losing ground to Titchener and Wundt and that new mystiques like “mental hygiene” were rendering the counsels of salvation obsolete? Nor was the decision to abandon the pulpit for the lectern unique; a veritable horde of like renegades in those days were fleeing the church for academe, forming the vanguard of the revolution which has since seen psychology, social science and literary criticism usurp altogether the traditional rule and role of the Queen of the Sciences and its Handmaid.

In short, there is little about Pratt’s outward life as such that is exceptional. The individual is only mildly fascinating, his personal adventures far from gripping. But, as Pitt has masterfully demonstrated, good biography is more than extended obituary or the celebration of the curiosities of someone’s life. The real purpose and challenge is to recover the living dialogue between the individual and his time. To be able to shed light on this conversation doubly illuminates. We better understand the poet’s work, of course, through the account of the objective circumstances of his life and time. But the converse is far more important: a good biographer provides us with a unique access to an era and environment, and not simply in the mode of objective history, but in a way that permits us to take hold of its actual, living spirit. Endowing us with the eyes, mind and heart of his hero, Pitt enables us to see, know and feel that world directly and vividly for ourselves.

Only great men, said Goethe, have great experiences. What qualifies Pratt to be our incomparable guide is precisely that he is no mere public figure or hero of the flesh. He is an adventurer of the spirit: a theologian, philosopher, psychologist and poet. He is therefore a testament to his world and time, not in its material or political aspect, but in its cultural essence and tendency. The chief merit of Pitt’s narrative, in my view, is precisely that it is so thoroughly what a biography of a poet can alone appropriately be: a spiritual history, the witness of a man for whom thoughts are things, images events, and self-consciousness a landscape.

Pitt’s Pratt breathes life again into the subjective dimension of a past which is profoundly our own, and gives it permanence. As one who grew up, like Pratt and Pitt themselves, in a Newfoundland parsonage, I can attest to the chilling authenticity, both spiritual and physical, of Pitt’s recreation of the year-long Good Friday that was outport Methodist life. Authentic too is Pitt’s phenomenology of the triumph of crypto-atheistic

humanism over the souls of those who inhabited the theological groves around Queen's Park. It is amusing to discover the familiar symptoms of Can-Lit's chronic self-conscious anemia already well-advanced in the Toronto of the twenties. And we can hear the thunder from his father's pulpit still echoing in Pratt's unconscious as he struggles to transpose the hymnary of Methodist idealism into a more worldly, modern key, sublimating the passion of the scriptures, Hardy-like, in a poetry of heroic, natural individualism.

To the evocation of these themes, Pitt brings an uncanny erudition concerning the detail of his hero's life and its setting. A master magpie has woven an impressive edifice of endless straws and rag-bits. Viewed too closely the texture is distracting—virtually every sentence is laced with piecemeal quotations from who-cares-where; no less than twice are we reminded that Pratt wrote "Witches" for "Witches'" in a letter to his wife.

But the interest of the author's running commentary entirely obliterates these flaws. Full of observations wry and wise that everywhere illuminate Pratt's genius and the literary and cultural landscape in which it was nurtured and developed, the style is reminiscent of the grand biography of enlightenment: scrupulous in fact and scholarship, eschewing the psychologizing and historicizing tendencies of contemporary biography, yet affirming a profounder reason inhabiting lives and events.

Cursed with a tin ear, I would not judge Pitt's aesthetic assessment of the poetry. But to read Pratt's lines again with the benefit of this excellent account of the spirit that dictated them and the man who wrote them down is to find their substance and impact enormously enhanced. This first volume is not, in any case, intended primarily as a work of literary criticism. It is Pratt's biography: a fascinating odyssey of a consciousness, uniquely proximate and contributory to our own, that takes us from Cupids to Toronto, from Victorianism to modernity, from piety to poetry. It is a fitting monument to its subject, an education in an era and its mentality and a fine, instructive story. The concluding volume we await with much anticipation.

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