

## *Unbuttoned: A History of Mackenzie King's Secret Life* by Christopher Dummitt

Chris Raible

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present. Historians should welcome this approach as a way of demonstrating the usefulness of history, and for its potential to capture the attention of the media, the interested public, and academics in other social science and humanities disciplines. Those audiences might find the small print and style of the bibliographic essay that

ends the book (“Further Reading” by Ian McKay, 333-357) curious, but it is sure to draw in historians interested in the Great War and of the traps in Canadian historical interpretation.

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*Unbuttoned*  
*A History of Mackenzie King’s Secret Life*

By Christopher Dummitt

Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017. 326 pages. \$34.95  
ISBN 978-0-7735-4876-3 (www.mqup.ca)

In opening lines of his Preface, Christopher Dummitt, an associate professor of history at Trent University, aptly summarizes his work:

I’m going to tell two stories.... One is the story of how Canadians came to learn about his eccentric private activities that long-serving prime minister William Lyon Mackenzie King had managed to keep secret while he was alive. The second story is about the transformation in Canadian culture from the 1950s to the 1980s that gradually allowed many Canadians to talk publicly and irreverently about the details of this former prime minister’s secret life.

Another tell-all King biography this book is not; it is a careful study of the shifting attitudes of his executors toward his private diary and it is a probing critique of the changing portrayals of King published after his 1950 death.

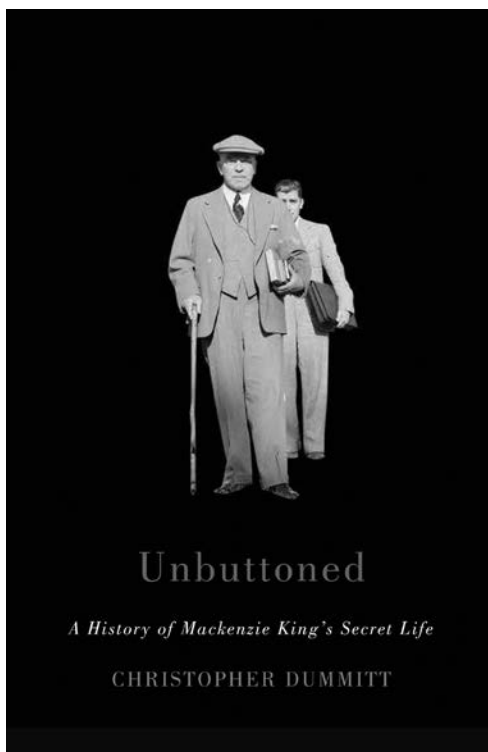
The disposition of King’s personal papers presented a problem. As we all know now, but almost no one knew then, King kept a daily diary begun during his Toronto student years in the 1890s. Written by him personally until the 1930s, and there-

after dictated to his private secretary, by the time of King’s death the diary consisted of thousands of pages, all carefully preserved in bound volumes and binders. His strict instructions were clear: after his death, the diary was to be destroyed, except the portions he indicated were to be preserved. He died leaving nothing so specified, so the entire diary must be destroyed. But it was not—indeed, after an extended series of strained decisions, well documented by Dummitt, its pages were finally transcribed and, in 1980 fully made public. The whole of it is now accessible on line—researchers can learn more about King than about any other prime minister (or indeed any public figure) in our history.

Dummitt offers (chapter 2) his own clear summary of King’s life. Subsequent chapters provide a historiography of works about King published during the three decades following his death. King himself had made little progress in writing his autobiography (despite a substantial Rockefeller Foundation grant to help make it possible), but much material had been assembled. King’s literary executors (four senior public servants) were

charged with sorting, evaluating and protecting vast quantities of papers and documents (including, of course, the diary) and with commissioning the writing of an official biography. MacGregor Dawson was recruited as author—the first volume (years 1874 to 1923) came out in 1958, shortly after Dawson's death. In due course, H.B. Neatby wrote volume II (1924-1932) published in 1963, and volume III (1932-1939) published in 1976. Frustrated by the delays, J.W. Pickersgill, an executor with full access to King's papers, partnered with Donald Forster to produce (in 1961, 1968, and 1970) four more quasi-official volumes, *The Mackenzie King Record*, covering the war and later years.

However, it was the unofficial biographies that attracted public attention, indeed, stirred considerable controversy. Much of *Unbuttoned* is devoted to describing these iterations of King's life, the public response to each of them, and the efforts of the executors to protect King's reputation. Chapters are devoted to H. Reginald Hardy's 1949 King biography with its references to King's interest in psychic research; to the 1950 attempts to suppress British medium Geraldine Cummins' published memoir of her séances with King; and to Blair Foster's 1951 *Maclean's* magazine sensational exposé, "The Secret Life of Mackenzie King, Spirit-



ualist." *Unbuttoned* continues, reflecting next on Eugene Forsey's many 1950's articles attacking King as little more than a grubby politician; and then on Bruce Hutchison's 1952 best-selling *The Incredible Canadian* that portrayed King, according to Dummitt (105), as "a man driven personally by the pettiest and silliest of intentions but who, thorough determination and skill, yet managed to achieve great things politically: a sublimation that ultimately ben-

efited the nation at large."

The stream of King biographies continued. In 1955, H.S. Ferns and Bernard Ostry's *The Age of Mackenzie King* bitterly attacked both King and the whole Liberal political establishment. Two years later F.R. Scott penned a widely republished poem "WLMK"; it closes: "Today he will be remembered / Wherever men honour ingenuity / Ambiguity, inactivity, and political longevity. / Let us raise up a temple / To the cult of mediocrity / Do nothing by halves / Which can be done by quarters." That same year, 1957, Patrick Watson and Douglas Leiterman aired a CBC television *Close Up* episode, a highly controversial personal portrait of King.

Despite all these efforts, not until the 1970s would C.P. Stacey, with his *A Very Double Life* and its lip-smacking revelations

of sexual activities and spiritualist interests, transform, perhaps permanently, the public image of King from dull political leader to “Weird Willy.”

Meanwhile, King’s executors and archivists also faced national security problems; copies of the unreleased diary pages were turning up in the black market, some of them possibly revealing wartime (and cold-war) cabinet decisions. Indeed, one whole volume of the diary—covering the latter half of 1945—disappeared and has yet to be recovered.

All in all, *Unbuttoned* reveals a fascinating world of bureaucracy, of feuds and rivalries, of public accountability and personal privacy. Much more than a book about the exposing of King, it is also an ad-

mirable study of evolving Canadian social and political values.

A final comment: King may well have inhabited both a public world and a private world, but who among us does not? For Mackenzie King to become “Weird Willie” had less to do with his behaviors than with our learning about them. If comparable detailed evidence of the private lives and inner thoughts of, say, Macdonald or Laurier or Trudeau were suddenly to be discovered, would not our evaluation of them also change? King is unique, not for his living “a double life,” but for his leaving so much documentation for both his lives.

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*A Fluid Frontier*  
*Slavery, Resistance, and the Underground Railroad in the*  
*Detroit River Borderland*

Edited by Karolyn Smardz Frost, and Veta Smith Tucker

Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2016. 360 pages. \$34.99 softcover. ISBN 9780814339596. Ebook available. ISBN 9780814339602 ([www.wsupress.wayne.edu](http://www.wsupress.wayne.edu))

*A Fluid Frontier: Slavery, Resistance, and the Underground Railroad in the Detroit River Borderland* offers an engaging and insightful approach to understanding the importance of American and Canadian relations along the Detroit River Borderland. Speaking to an absence in historical scholarship discussing the interconnected nature of antebellum African American and African Canadians, editors and contributors of this volume are concerned with the ways national boundaries and borders restructured the parameters of ‘freedom’ in North America. Arguing that the Detroit River region was part of a large and com-

plex transnational project, which included black and whites in Canada and the United States, *A Fluid Frontier* expands the frameworks of abolitionist thought and activism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (5).

Offering a richness of archival and community sources that lend to an expanded view of Underground Railroad scholarship, contributors urge readers to consider the role that black abolitionist leaders, community members and individuals had in ensuring the successful movement of free and enslaved persons through the Detroit borderland. Repositioning