

Mike Starr of Oshawa: A Political Biography by Myron Momryk

C.P. Champion

Volume 113, Number 2, Fall 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081122ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081122ar>

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Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Champion, C. (2021). Review of [*Mike Starr of Oshawa: A Political Biography* by Myron Momryk]. *Ontario History*, 113(2), 260–262.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1081122ar>

Mike Starr of Oshawa

A Political Biography

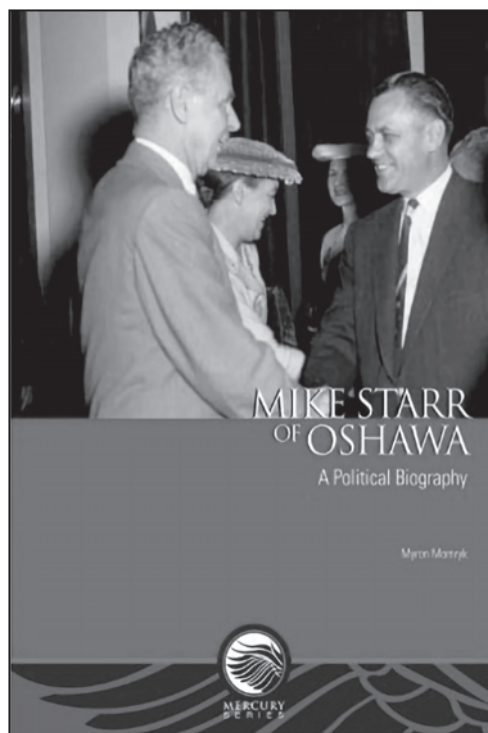
by Myron Momryk

Ottawa, Ontario: Mercury Series History Paper 57, Canadian Museum of History and University of Ottawa Press, 2017. 242 pages. \$39.95 softcover. ISBN 978-0-7766-2591-1. (historymuseum.ca/boutique)

“Leave them alone and pretty soon the Ukrainians will think they won the battle of Trafalgar,” Leacock wrote. Michael Starchewski’s father and mother, farm labourers from Galicia, met and married in 1909 in Copper Cliff, Ontario, where Michael was born in 1910. By 1920 they had built a four-room house on a four-acre freehold in Lakeview at Oshawa. There was no “overt discrimination” at the public school; the culture gap “only encouraged him to compete and study more diligently” (8). By 1964 Mike Starr, Progressive Conservative MP, stood with Diefenbaker to defend the Red Ensign from the Liberals’ “bulldozing,” to “preserve the traditions of this country as well as its symbols,... traditions of which to be proud” (160).

It matters who wins battles. In Ukraine in 1922 the Bolshevik conquest snuffed out a “new, modern, democratic and Christian state,” said William Wall, a Liberal and the first Senator of Ukrainian descent. Born in Manitoba in 1911, he attended Yale and Harvard, became principal of Winnipeg’s Lord Nelson School and city superintendent, and in 1959 denounced “the mounting barrage of Communist propaganda” depicting “Union” as a “logical and legitimate result” when in fact Ukraine’s “colonial position” reached its nadir in Stalin’s terror-famine of 3.5 million dead.¹

In Oshawa, Soviet propagandists targeted Ukrainians, Poles, Hungarians, and Germans, Momryk writes, with a major-



ity quite sympathetic to the Party and its front activities. Non-communist entities such as Prosvita, monarchist Sitch Organization, and Ukrainian National Federation were slandered as “fascists... agents of fascism and Trotsky-ites,” even the flying and parachuting club (19). The 1937 auto workers’ strike, and high taxes, prompted the 27-year-old Starr to run for alderman. He declined to run as a “labour” candidate and lost. Immersing himself in community service and minority languages, in 1940 he was elected secretary of the new Ukrainian Canadian Committee and of St. John’s Ukrainian Orthodox parish. Only after five failed runs did he become an alderman in 1944 and mayor of Oshawa from 1949 to 1952.

Starr then ran for the federal constituency oddly named Ontario. Most Ukrainians were Laurier Liberals but Starr broke

the mould, creating a "sensation among the Ukrainian community in Canada" (43). When Diefenbaker pipped the Liberals in 1957, Paul Martin Sr., the Franco-Irish-Catholic poster-boy from Windsor, told Starr: "We've got to destroy him if it's the last thing we do, so we can get back into office." Starr replied, "You must be kidding, Paul" (57). For the Grits holding power was life and death; for the Tory it was just politics.

Starr had a broad vision-scale. As an MP he transmitted, via the CBC's Ukrainian Section, that, "The time will come when the spirit of freedom penetrates the Iron Curtain of oppression, the prison of nations crumbles and the regime of terror disintegrates under the blows of the victorious forces of freedom and democracy." This caused an outcry from the Soviet Embassy and the Department of External Affairs, and a "debate" within the CBC regarding the "ultimate purpose" of its Ukrainian section (43); surely it was not to oppose Communism?

When Starr became Minister of Labour (1957-63), the "first cabinet minister of non-British and non-French descent" and "first person of Cabinet rank in Canada of Ukrainian extraction," he "created a sensation," Momryk says again, "throughout ethnocultural communities across Canada" (60). The Tories' politics of inclusion saw the first Chinese M.P., war hero Douglas Jung; first senator with Indian status, James Gladstone; and the franchise extended to status Indians in 1960. The Liberals felt sorely threatened, as Thirstan Falconer has confirmed.²

In Starr's day immigrants were successful without programs. The "foreigners" in Oshawa took the "best school prizes" while "the Canadians" preferred "games and sports." (8) His father toiled in a factory, ran a business, and worked for General Mo-

tors. Michael worked for a printer, then for his father but "soon learned he could earn substantially more... in a clerical position in an office" and began "cramming thirteen subjects into a one-year commercial course" at Oshawa Collegiate. It's ironic, then, that Starr campaigned in 1958 saying "it was 'the government's business' as long as one Canadian was out of work." Then as now, the best social program is a job and the key factor in integration, Jeffery Reitz has shown, "is education."³

"Policy" is overrated, as "multiculturalism" was nothing more than the liberalism of a polyethnic Empire and Ukrainians picked up on it: Nick Mandziuk, born in Ukraine in 1902 and Tory MP for Marquette (1957-68), said that when his countrymen first arrived in the 1890s, "The Anglo-Saxons gave the newcomers a helping hand."⁴ In 1926 the first MP of Ukrainian origin, Michael Luchkovich (born in Pennsylvania), told the Commons on behalf of "those whose origin was in a foreign country": "As it happens I do not belong to a group commanding a very large membership, but that will in no way prevent me from doing my duty as a good citizen; on the contrary, I believe that only in this group can I do my duty conscientiously and faithfully."⁵

Starr in 1967, chagrined by Tory infighting despite multiple government scandals, stood as a unity candidate and populist successor to Diefenbaker, something Dalton Camp's party might have found useful a year later, faced with publicity agents' fabrication of Trudeaumania. Starr did not possess a German helmet or a Mercedes but he did stride about the Tory convention led by "a tame chimpanzee on a chain... capering along ahead" with its handler, hired by Starr's desperate campaign manager, Erik Nielsen MP, another son of immigrants.

There were few fireworks when Starr

served as acting opposition leader from September to November 1967 before Bob Stanfield took a seat. In 1968 Starr was finally defeated by Oshawa's Eddie Broadbent, long-awaited revenge for the Whitby-Oshawa left. Gerrymandering had lopped off Starr's rural supporters and he lost by only eight votes (197). He went on to be a Citizenship judge (1968-72), Workmen's Compensation adjudicator (1973-83) and Honorary Colonel (1979-83) of the Ontario Regiment, the local army reserve tank unit (228). Predeceased by his wife in 1985 and by a son in 1988, and disillusioned with Mulroney's catering to Quebec, Starr backed Preston Manning's Reform Party. He died in 2000, much decorated and mourned after the model career of a sincere and talented *homo politicus* who remained humanly grounded and kept his personal life intact.

Momryk's reconstruction takes town, union, constituency, cold war, Orthodox vs. Catholic, party politics and local, national, and international issues to a new level. I wonder if there is another monograph as thorough. We travel alongside Starr in his tireless campaigning, gold-plated constituency service, arranging a pension for the skint defector Gouzenko, navigating the politics and economics of General Motors, asking an "unemployed" demonstrator how long he'd been out of work, only to be told that the fellow was a paid employee staging a "media event" for the union (114);

the Starrs assuring Pope Pius XII that he was Minister of Labour for all Canada, not merely Quebec; Starr telling the Queen his family story aboard HM Yacht *Britannia* en route to Thunder Bay. A colour photo of a boyishly star-struck Starr meeting Kennedy at the White House, where they discussed seasonal works projects (121) brings a smile. When it comes to a peculiar incident in which a flower girl in Edmonton named Terry Bykstal was introduced to Her Majesty as "Terry O'Brien," thus "perpetuating the image of Ukrainians as second-class citizens" (99), one wishes Momryk had elaborated. A Queen named Saxe-Cobourg-Gotha-Battenberg would have no objection to meeting a Bykstal: which local toady hid the girl's name and why?

Momryk's chronological treatment is relentless, the density unrelieved by the publishers' inexcusable omission of an index. The glossy paper and clunky Mercury Series trim size give the feel of a hefty museum guidebook. Yet unlike comparable biographies, such as Rick Salutin's life of the philo-Communist Kent Rowley or Greg Donaghy's life of Paul Martin, Sr. (which basks a little too warmly in the glow of the author's admiration) the tone is unpretentious and Momryk is no hagiographer. It is one of the best resources of its kind in this country to date.

C.P. Champion
The Dorchester Review

¹ Hansard, 22 January 1959, 27.

² Thirstan Falconer, "An Ethnic Coalition: the Liberal Party of Canada and the Engagement of Ethnocultural Communities, 1959-1974" (Ph.D. diss., University of Victoria, 2017), 32, 89.

³ Jeffrey G. Reitz, "Immigrant Employment Success in Canada, I, Individual and Contextual Causes," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 8:1 (2007), 36.

⁴ Hansard, 20 May 1958, 259.

⁵ Hansard, 14 December 1926, 83.