

Tom Symons A Canadian Life Edited by Ralph Heintzman

Ron Stagg

Volume 104, numéro 1, spring 2012

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065406ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065406ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Stagg, R. (2012). Compte rendu de [*Tom Symons A Canadian Life* Edited by Ralph Heintzman]. *Ontario History*, 104(1), 227–229.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1065406ar>

and much else deserve far more attention than they receive in this book.

Overall though, this is a remarkable book. It deserves plaudits for its good work in recording and discussing the founding and development of a new university over the past fifty years. Thanks to the ability and integrity of its authors and editor, it is a useful, scholarly, highly professional and authoritative publication which will be of considerable interest and assistance for years to come for students of higher education and, more broadly, to many people

Tom Symons A Canadian Life

Edited by Ralph Heintzman

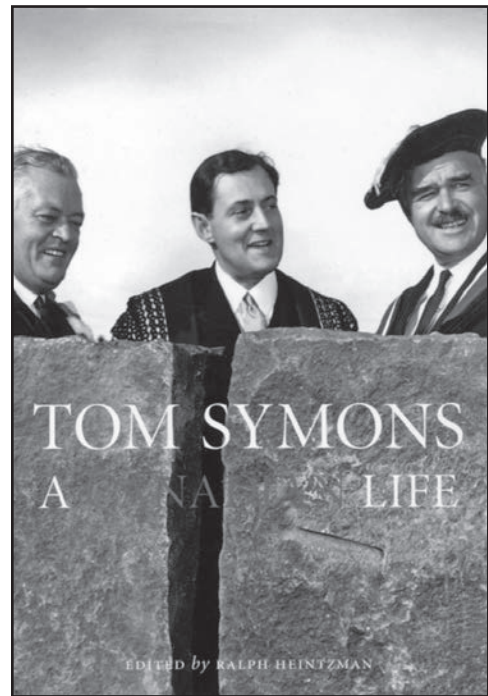
Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2011.

488 pages. \$36.95 hardcover. ISBN 978-0-7766-3043-0
(www.press.uottawa.ca)

Tom Symons A Canadian Life is an attempt to capture the essence of the many activities, the influence, and the personality of the man. As the song title goes, "Oh what a life." A modest sampling of Tom Symons' accomplishments includes: founding president of a university (Trent) at age 34, principal policy organizer for Robert Stanfield during the latter's run for the position of prime minister, lead author of a pioneering report on Canadian studies, chair of major organizations such as the Ontario Human Rights Commission and the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, one of the forces behind the creation of Pearson College, which offers a two year, pre-university international baccalaureate, and subsequently chair of the multi-national body which was responsible for the international system of such schools, a position which began a working relationship and friendship with Prince Charles, public champion of a bicultural and multicultural Canada and of aborigi-

engaged in the wider field of Canadian studies. It is, in fact, an important contribution both to the literature on Canadian post-secondary education and to those engaged in the study of many different facets of Canadian life beyond academe. It is a work of very substantial scholarship based on extensive research and much thoughtful consultation.

Thomas H.B. Symons,
Trent University,
Chair, the Ontario Heritage Trust



nal rights, and major participant in myriad other endeavours which gave him national and international influence.

This is not a biography, but rather a variation on that strange academic concept, the festschrift. Usually conceived to pay homage to a senior academic by former students, the festschrift would normally

consist of essays on academic subjects of interest to the various authors. In this case the work consists of essays by people who have worked with Symons over the years on various aspects of his long career. The book does not pretend to cover every endeavour. Symons' list of positions, awards and publications, at the end of the book, runs to twenty-six pages. Rather, the authors have chosen activities with which each is familiar. One suspects that festschrifts sell mostly to other former students and to colleagues. Luckily, Symons has touched the lives of so many people that the book should sell well. It would be ideal if it also sold well to the many Canadians who have not heard of Symons, because much of his work has been done, with the exception of his work with Trent University, out of the public view.

As a work of general interest, however, the book has strengths and weaknesses. Some articles focus on the man and his activities in a particular field. These often explain a bit about the man behind the accomplishments, as well as looking at aspects of the activity. One good example is Chapter 11, "Peace and International Understanding through Education: Tom Symons and the United World Colleges" by the editor, Ralph Heintzman, which contains several delightful anecdotes. Another example is Chapter 9, by Rosalie Abella, which deals with Symons' work as head of the Ontario Human Rights Commission. A number of chapters, however, are essentially lists of meetings, resolutions and policies. Symons is only mentioned as being involved in the discussions. For the general reader, these chapters encourage glazed-over eyes. This is unfortunate as the activities themselves are of major importance, either in Canada or in the broader world, and Symons was heavily involved in each.

Reading of the various activities makes one wonder if Symons' feet ever touched

the ground in the 1970s and '80s, as he involved himself with multiple tasks, each one enough to keep a person fully occupied. Whether working on fundraising for the United Commonwealth Universities organization, chairing a committee to choose Canadian recipients of Commonwealth scholarships, sitting on the Federal Cultural Review Committee, chairing the Meta Incognita Project Steering Committee, which developed policy to deal with northern archeological research concerning the Frobisher expedition, working to encourage education in the French language in Ontario, or supporting aboriginal rights (before this was a widespread policy), Symons was equally at home meeting with Inuit representatives or with provincial premiers, heads of foreign universities, and British royalty. The majority of the authors comment on how his sincere charm, diplomatic behavior, and powers of persuasion often allowed his views to have considerable weight. The authors constantly remind the reader that Tom Symons has an old-fashioned air about him. Probably the terms gentlemanly and courtly best sum up this assessment. Yet few of the authors try to explain what impelled this man to take on so many tasks, often simultaneously. Even now, after numerous honorary degrees, appointments as a Companion of the Order of Canada, and the Order of Ontario, as well as other national and international awards, he remains active in his ninth decade. Among his other service activities he chairs the Ontario Heritage Trust, the government organization charged with recognizing places and people of historical interest in Ontario. Readers of *Ontario History* will see that he also took time to do a book review for the current issue.

Only Chapter 19, "Tom the Radical Tory" by Marco Adria, and Chapter 20, "A Canadian Life" by Ralph Heintzman,

try to sum up the motivations for all of these activities, and many more discussed, or listed, in the book. He is called a Radical Tory because he values all that has gone before, but unlike a classic Tory, does not look backwards to a better time, but forwards to what might be accomplished. A strong believer in the Monarchy as a part of Canadian culture, stemming from our past, he sees culture as including the physical environment (our history, architecture and the land itself), but also our bicultural and multicultural character and the contributions made by aboriginal peoples. All of these things must be defended, for they are the sum of what we are. They bring us together with a sense of community. Central to this defence is education, as well as government action, in areas such as human rights and preservation of the history, architecture and the natural environment. Since we do not operate in a vacuum here in Canada, Symons ideas extend to the broader world community in which Canada operates. I would tend to call him a liberal conservative as well. He wants to hold

on to the good from the past, but move forward. As a conservative he has not challenged the system, whatever the system was in each activity, but he worked tirelessly to point the way forward, towards change for the better.

This book is really for the many people who have worked or studied with him, but it would also appeal to his 'fans', those who have not worked with him, but have observed him in action and admire him. Students of the political process would find the chapter on working with Robert Stanfield of interest. Canadian nationalists would do well to look at material covering his broad definition of culture and the need to defend it. Certainly anyone who wants to understand the committee process in quasi-governmental and non-governmental bodies would find useful material here. For a broader audience, though, it would be good to have more of the man and less of the process.

Ron Stagg
Ryerson University