

Trudeaumania by Paul Litt

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Trudeaumania

by Paul Litt

Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2016. 412 pages.
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There is an image of Pierre Trudeau that has been with me my entire life. It was taken in 1971 at a Liberal Party Christmas function in Ottawa,

where my father worked as a radio reporter. Dressed in a sport jacket and ascot, Trudeau is standing in the centre of the frame in profile, while Margaret, his new bride, stands just behind him. His smile is as wide as his sideburns are long. Moving his way through the crowd, the prime minister is extending his right hand to my father—or at least it looks that way—while his left has come to rest on the small of my mother’s back. My mother, a young woman at the time, looks like she has just met a pop star. A faded inscription in the bottom right hand corner of the picture reads: “Love Pierre.” Displayed prominently in my childhood home, this image was part of my family history—our Ottawa years. But after reading Paul Litt’s fascinating new book, I can’t help but see it as a rather precise expression of “Trudeaumania”—that heady combination of youth, image, and celebrity “sizzle” that captured Canadian politics in the late ’60s and early ’70s.

Trudeau’s rise to power has been studied extensively. Historians, political scientists, and literary biographers have probed his intellectual formation, the dynamics of

the federal Liberal Party, and the broader contours of Canadian politics in the post-war era, especially Quebec’s quiet revolution. Litt seeks to understand the triumph of Trudeau from a different vantage point: the media. He begins with a broad introduction to the 1960s, teasing out the various ways in which the “consensus culture” of the previous decade cracked under the heavy pressures of generational change, intellectual and political dissent, and “lifestyle liberations” of all kinds (14). At the same time, Litt illustrates, a nascent Canadian nationalism emerged, anchoring a “decolonization project” that sought to end the country’s historic subordination to Britain while defining a new collective sensibility grounded in pluralism, liberalism, and anti-Americanism (41).

Into this maelstrom stepped Trudeau, the perfect avatar of change. His image as a non-conformist and “rugged individualist” aligned with prevailing countercultural sensibilities, while his views on multiculturalism, “participatory democracy,” and a “just society” chimed with the youthful yen for a new definition of Canada. He was, in other words, a mod man for mod times, an “action hero” in an “old folks’ home” (266, 159). And the media, Litt asserts, was critical to all of this. Across its many platforms—radio, print, and especially television—it constructed and circulated an image of Trudeau that became more powerful than Trudeau himself. The end result was an effervescent, simulated sense of nationhood—a “simunation”—that pro-

pelled the swinging, style-conscious, athletic, media-savvy bachelor all the way to 24 Sussex Drive in 1968.

Litt explores the configuration of the Canadian “media complex” in depth, paying particular attention to the broad homogeneity of its personnel: they tended to be university-educated and urban, and were sympathetic to Canadian nationalism and of a “modern mindset” (148, 90, 172). Men like my father, who came from small towns, and “Jimmy Olsen-like... got their start on the police beat, and moved up the ladder by dint of native ability, gumption, and street smarts,” were few and far between as journalism became professionalized (90). This crowd, Litt argues, wrote the script for Trudeau’s rise. And the audience – increasingly from the same, broad socio-economic background as the media—was more than willing to play its part. They watched the news coverage, bought the t-shirts and posters, and chased the chosen one for autographs and pictures. Such sizzling sex-tinged spectacles then became fodder for additional media coverage, producing a self-reinforcing loop of celebrity, politics, and popular participation that drove “Trudeaumania” forward. The book’s well-chosen images accentuate this point.

By the time of the federal election campaign in 1968, Litt writes, Trudeaumania was in full flower. Drawing on lessons learned at the leadership contest the year before, the Liberals’ backroom worked assiduously to present Trudeau as a man on the move and in tune with the changing times. The media, Litt observes, was more than happy to play along. Images of Trudeau swimming, dancing, and waving to adoring crowds proliferated; so too did blunt contrasts with Robert Stanfield and Tommy Douglas, now cast as yesterday’s men. Other media spectacles added additional momentum to the public’s desire

to “Go, Go with Trudeau.” A highly publicized standoff with Quebec nationalists during the Saint-Jean-Baptiste parade that spring cemented the candidate’s reputation as a defender of the national interest. When the ballots were finally counted, the mod man had secured a majority government.

But by historical standards it was no landslide. Nor was it rock solid. When Trudeau went back to the polls four years later, the Liberals were cut back to 109 seats and minority status. Where, one might ask, had “Trudeaumania” gone?

Litt takes up this question in the final chapters of the book by clarifying what he means by “mania.” The scale of the “contagion,” he writes, matters less than its ability to motivate particular groups of people in a powerful way: “Those who liked Trudeau liked him a lot” (315). On its own, this claim is not especially satisfying for a number of reasons, not least is that it highlights the very limits of elite opinion makers, the resilience of the “limited identities” of region, and the persistence of conservative values in a liberal age—perspective that challenges the book’s very thesis. Litt is more persuasive when he turns his sharp eye to the decades that followed Trudeau’s rise to power. Over time, he suggests, “Trudeaumania” tumbled forward and became part of the generational consciousness of the baby boomers as a whole. An expression of “peak” Canadian nationalism in the tumultuous sixties, it shaped the very discursive terrain upon which this generation would think about its personal and political selves and debate what it meant to be Canadian. In short, the kiss of the mod man would linger. My mother, I suspect, would agree.

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