

## Canada as Interpreted by W. L. M. King and Others

Richard Wilbur

Volume 7, Number 1, Autumn 1977

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad7\\_1rv05](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad7_1rv05)

[See table of contents](#)

---

### Publisher(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

### ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

### Cite this review

Wilbur, R. (1977). Review of [Canada as Interpreted by W. L. M. King and Others]. *Acadiensis*, 7(1), 136–141.

### Canada as Interpreted by W. L. M. King and Others

I have read every line of King's published diaries. I have to say, without prejudice, for I liked the old scoundrel, that they are not worth two pieces; they recalled for me Felix Frankfurter's remark that "as a source of history, diaries aren't worth a damn". Actually this is a record of housekeeping of the Liberal Party under King, with God an invisible pilot.<sup>1</sup>

So wrote one of the great Canadian journalists and Conservative political advisors of this century. The fact that Gratton O'Leary was a journalist, and a Conservative one at that, may make his opinions on Mackenzie King doubly suspect. His views, based as they are on personal associations and observations over six decades, contrast sharply with simon-pure historians, seemingly fascinated with the words of the mighty, left so conveniently for their perusal by Wily Willy, with a hefty assist from the Rockefeller Foundation.

Blair Neatby's second volume on King, *William Lyon Mackenzie King: The Prism of Unity* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1976), has all the characteristics of the history establishment — heavily footnoted, heavily written and containing few surprises. It is a scholar's book, with 32 pages devoted to footnotes and sources. Admittedly, about three quarters of the notes refer directly to the King diaries, but the other sources indicate how thoroughly Neatby has followed his craft. I only wish he had made more use of the partisan newspaper comments of the thirties. William Marchington's Ottawa column for the *Globe* or Grant Dexter's views on King and the Ottawa scene during these years — views expressed succinctly and often in great detail to his editor John W. Dafoe — would have redressed the balance, would have prevented this book from becoming almost an autobiography. The papers of Ernest Lapointe, that indispensable French Canadian lieutenant, could also have been used more than the two lonely footnotes suggest that they were. In the preface, Neatby informs us that he consulted some of King's associates and contemporaries, but in his list all but Rod Finlayson, Bennett's executive assistant, were staunch Liberals. Gratton O'Leary could have given him another perspective, as could Frank Scott, Tommy Douglas and scores of others.

O'Leary's sweeping dismissal of the value of the King's diaries was too negative, but his reference to Frankfurter's view should not be ignored. Felix Frankfurter was a learned and highly respected jurist, one especially trained in assessing various kinds of written evidence. During the 1950s Henry Ferns and Bernard Ostry did not have the unlimited access to the massive material

1 Gratton O'Leary, *Recollections of People, Press and Politics* (Toronto, Macmillan, 1977), p. 81.

about or by King so freely available to Neatby, although Ferns had the advantage of being a member of External Affairs during the latter half of the decade. For their *The Age of Mackenzie King* (reprinted, Toronto, James Lorimer and Company, 1976) they had to go far beyond and sometimes around this research problem — to personal interviews, archival holdings of King's contemporaries, government documents and newspapers, American and British as well as Canadian. As John Meisel notes in his introduction to the 1976 edition, "this restriction compelled the authors to make do with limited documents and so to subject the sources to the most painstaking winnowing". As a result, these then young unknowns challenged "the official biographers to address themselves to issues and aspects of their problem they would almost certainly otherwise have overlooked or underplayed" (p.xi).

Professor Neatby faced no such challenge. Because Ferns and Ostry, and people like myself with some expertise on the period and with different perspectives, did not produce similar critical studies of King and Bennett during the depression, Neatby more or less had the field to himself, free to use the King diaries as I am sure that master politician had intended — to serve as the most authentic and authoritative source for events in this troubled decade — events first carefully selected by King himself and subsequently accepted by his official biographers. This is not to suggest that Neatby withheld his own critical judgment or that he always relied on King's 'beyond-the-grave explanations'. Repeatedly he ticks off King for his ceaseless preoccupation with politics at the expense of all else. He notes how in December and January 1938 King adamantly refused to accept the recommendations of the National Employment Commission for "a unified and coordinated system of nationally-administered Unemployment Insurance" (p. 248). Tossing aside Norman Rogers' cogent arguments, King feared that such a move would mean deficit budgetting, something too horrendous for his conservative thinking and he persuaded (or forced) the commission grudgingly to refer the matter to the Rowell-Sirois Commission. In chapter 9, "The Liberal Response to the Depression", Neatby is perhaps most unrestrained in his criticisms as he reveals King's intransigence in insisting that economic recovery "depended ultimately on private enterprise" (p. 153). Neatby credits Bennett with being much more sensitive to new approaches, noting that the Tory leader's "abortive New Deal had at least reflected the need for an expanded federal role" (p. 154).

It should be emphasized, however, that this is a study not of the depression, but of a consummate and successful political strategist who put his party before everything. While the depression theme flits in and out, it was decidedly a secondary issue in King's mind to the problem of regaining and maintaining political power. Once he decided to tie himself to the diary as his main source, Neatby could not give us a broader picture of this horrible decade.

Instead we are given what O'Leary would call 'vintage King' — a version with few surprises, fewer revelations and some agonizing omissions. In the latter category, Quebec, that bulwark of Kingsian Liberalism, stands out. How was it kept so skilfully within the Liberal fold? What did Lapointe actually do to keep his Quebec forces faithful? What were his day-to-day contacts with his chief? What was the nature of the Montreal support? Did King deal with this largely English faction or did he leave it in Lapointe's hands? Neatby doesn't tell us. He may have sensed this lack of light on King's Quebec base. After this second King volume had gone to press, he devoted an article to "MacKenzie King and French Canada" in the *Journal of Canadian Studies* in February 1976.

Perhaps the strongest part of the book is its largest single sub-topic, foreign affairs. King's relations with Franklin Roosevelt, his cautious handling of the British, with the anglophobe O. D. Skelton at his elbow — these brought increased pressure for more positive and a more substantial defence commitment. You can read about this period in much greater detail in a work often referred to by Neatby, James Eayrs' *In Defense of Canada: Appeasement and Rearmament* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1965), and I must confess at times I turned to Eayrs' account for livelier reading, a respite from King's heavy diary excerpts. The most succinct and most recent examination of King's foreign policy and in particular his contrasting attitudes toward the British and the Americans in C. P. Stacey, *Mackenzie King and the Atlantic Triangle: the 1976 Joanne Goodman Lectures Delivered at the University of Western Ontario* (Toronto, Macmillan of Canada, 1976). Canada's most renowned military historian and a latter-day King expert builds a convincing case to show that King's "inherited preferences were for Britain rather than the United States" (p. 65). Even though King "kept his mouth tightly shut about it in public . . . clearly he could not conceive of Canada attempting to be neutral in a great war in which Britain was involved" (p. 64). The increased emphasis on foreign affairs is readily apparent in Neatby's account. Its predictable end with the declaration of war in 1939 underlines how the depression faded from our politicians' view as they turned to a more familiar problem. As Neatby suggests and as other research indicates, the deteriorating European picture was almost welcomed by King and other western leaders as a fortuitous diversion from the depression. A recent study of the major urban Canadian newspapers shows how quickly most editors moved the depression news from the front page in favour of the Ethiopian crisis during the summer of 1935,<sup>2</sup> just as the federal election campaign began. The one city where the depression remained prominently on page one was Ottawa, undoubtedly because of the On-to-Ottawa Trek and the federal

2 Donald Peters, "Ethiopia and Depression News in Some Canadian Newspapers During the Summer of 1935" (unpublished manuscript, Concordia University, 1977).

steps taken to disperse the unemployed. If this analysis of the press had been extended up to 1939, I suspect the trend toward predominantly European news would have been even more obvious, even though the depression in Canada continued unabated. A case of managed news? Probably.

The threat of war and what it might do to Canadian unity (and to the Liberal Party's Quebec support) worried King so much that "for the first time in his life [he] lost hope" (p. 288). He soon rallied, after receiving a cable from Lapointe leaving the decision in King's hands, although making it clear that he was personally as opposed as ever to any overseas involvement. Armed with this rather questionable reassurance, King was convinced that "the government would be united in favour of participation if Britain went to war" (p. 291). King next turned his attention briefly to a thorny domestic issue, the future of the federal wheat board. It was resolved, not too happily for some western MP's, when King, ably assisted by his western lieutenant, Jimmy Gardiner, agreed to a wheat bill guaranteeing a minimum wheat price of seventy cents a bushel, a decision that further weakened King's basic resolve to keep the federal government from interfering in the market place. Neatby cites this, along with King's reluctant acceptance of deficit financing, as proof of the Liberal leader's "capacity to adapt to changing political patterns" (p. 308). Fair enough, for this is what Neatby's book is about: King the politician and his political responses to pressures to his party and government over seven hectic years. Within this perspective, we learn much about King, the master tactician, about Canada's Fabian, the great delayer.

Does C. P. Stacey's *A Very Double Life: The Private World of Mackenzie King* (Toronto, Macmillan of Canada, 1976), a peek into King's personal life, tell us more about King the man? Undoubtedly it does. By introducing us to the women in his life, Stacey raises several tantalizing and sometimes important questions. I am not referring to King's pursuit of prostitutes, if indeed they were, or whether he was intimate with any of them (the diaries are never that explicit — after all they were written by King). It doesn't matter, really. More to the point is King's relations with such women as Marjorie Herridge, the wife of Ottawa's most prominent Presbyterian minister and the mother of William D. Herridge, who would become R. B. Bennett's brother-in-law and Canada's minister to Washington from 1932 - 1935, a coincidence that could only happen within Ottawa's tiny social elite. Shades of John Porter's *The Vertical Mosaic!* Bill Herridge, the co-author of Bennett's New Deal Broadcasts and programme, was an impressionable fourteen years when his mother became infatuated with King, sixteen years her junior. It was also this relationship, which may not have been platonic, that prompted King to buy land in the Gatineaus, land that grew to become his beloved Kingsmere. Obviously, King's friendship with the Herridge's in the period 1900 - 1914 had little bearing on King's response to Bennett's New

Deal some twenty years later, but it must have been tempting to Bill Herridge, during that frustrating spring of 1935, when his New Deal strategy was being ruined by the hesitating Bennett sulking alone in his Chateau Laurier suite, not to have commiserated with his mother's old friend, Rex King. As it happened, it was not Herridge but C. H. Cahan, Bennett's disillusioned Secretary of State and the spokesman for St. James Street who poured out his soul to King — an incident not mentioned in Neatby's political history.

Stacey's account also firmly establishes King's obsession with wealth — rich women, mostly American, who might have become his wife, if his mother fixation had not intervened; — rich patrons like Rockefeller and Violet Markham, the English woman who gave King £300 a year from 1911 - 1914, to tide him over after his political defeat, and who was ready with another contribution when King retired in 1948. No wonder that King, who pretended to be unaware that he had become a wealthy man, had so little sympathy with ordinary Canadians struggling through the depression. Conversely, Bennett was much wealthier but gave more generously, admittedly sometimes with a political motive, to citizens writing to him about their desperate need. Bennett had too much ego and temper, but he had more heart than King.

Stacy is emphatic in stressing that King's private world, with its interminable seances and table tapping sessions wherever he went, had little influence on King's public and political world. King's so-called spiritual world was simply a reflection of his sub-conscious. When it came to making hard decisions to keep his cabinet in line or to placate regional demands and stresses, King discarded his spiritual advisors for his own shrewd intuition and great political experience. And yet, I cannot help wondering whether this spiritual world, and the inordinate amount of time King devoted to it (as much as six hours a night, even during parliamentary sessions) intruded somewhat on his appreciation and perceptions of the day-to-day world of ordinary Canadians. Few would argue with Stacey's view that King lacked a sense of humour, a point that the author's witty asides make plain, just as Neatby's account, based as it is on this humorless politician's version of events, is utterly devoid of levity. If only these two historians had combined both their talents and material, perhaps we would have had a better study of this complex man. Perhaps we could have had the kind of study Ferns and Ostry produced on King's rise to the leadership, a book telling us more about King because they placed him in a broader setting, in the real world. There is no doubt in my mind which of these King studies will make it in the academic world, which will be the bible for undergraduate essays on King and the politics of the thirties. I am equally certain which will be read with enjoyment and many a smile by a wider public. But the day that Ferns and Ostry went their separate ways, leaving their one volume with no hope of another, that

day Canadians lost two superb scholars and the chance for a complete look at Mackenzie King — a clear look unhampered by apologetic diaries and the establishment's research foundations.

RICHARD WILBUR

### Biography and Political Culture in Quebec

Three recent biographies of Quebec political leaders sustain one of Canadian historiography's curious phenomena: French Canadian academics leave the field entirely to others. Although several have seriously investigated the career of a French Canadian political leader, only Andrée Désilets has published a complete study. True, political history in general has recently lost some favour among Canadian historians, English as well as French. But the Quebec phenomenon clearly predates the shift in fashion, and aversion to biography has afflicted even those whose interests are solidly political. Part of the explanation may well be ideological: a prior assumption that French Canadian Prime Ministers, Premiers and "Lieutenants" have ultimately been collaborators in the exploitation of their people by aliens. Even if held only subconsciously, such a belief must severely discourage genuine sympathy for the individual personality, minimize the historical importance of questions about motivation and prejudge the merits of an individual performance. Whatever the reasons, the new works in question point up the desirability of biographical studies by French Canadian scholars. All three make interesting reading and are well researched, but none seems to recognize, let alone confront, interpretive problems peculiar to the political culture of French Canada.

Alastair Sweeny's *George-Etienne Cartier* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1976) attempts to fill an obvious gaping hole in our nineteenth-century political historiography. The first chapter subtitle, "Cartier and his Ontario Lieutenant", accurately signals the approach: to rewrite the Confederation period giving Cartier centre stage. Within limits, it is understandable and acceptable for a biographer to elevate the importance of his subject. But Sweeny goes overboard, assigning Cartier prime agency for every major initiative. In founding the Great Coalition, in the Riel Affair and in the British Columbia negotiations, John A. Macdonald becomes a secondary figure. In these episodes, and in his exceedingly tangled account of the Pacific Scandal, the author's revisionism is merely plausible. Lacking hard evidence, he relies frequently upon a succession of "probablys" "may haves" and "must haves", and reasons from teleological assumptions. In chapters tracing Cartier's early career, similar exercises in historical reconstruction are necessary and welcome. Little was previously known or recorded, and substantial documentation has not survived. Combining a good