

## *Partisan Odysseys: Canada's Political Parties* by Nelson Wiseman

Colin McCullough, Ph.D.

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chronic malnourishment of Indigenous peoples in Canada.” (108)

The following chapter re-introduces the thrifty gene to the story. In 1999, a research team comprised of scientists from the University of Toronto and the University of Western Ontario, announced at a press conference in London, Ontario that they had confirmed the discovery of the thrifty gene. The conclusion was a result of the 1991 Sandy Lake Health and Diabetes Project, which was a response to the emergence of type 2 diabetes in the 1980s. The “discovery” of the thrifty gene in Sandy Lake sparked government interest and funding for research on the hypothesis. Here, Hay drives the point that despite the attention and funding that the research brought to the Sandy Lake community, this story highlights “the inability of Canadians to support First Nations communities except through the science of settler colonialism.” (148) Moreover, Hay emphasizes that the focus on the thrifty gene perpetuates the idea that diabetes in Indigenous people is genetic and erases the impacts of the lack of healthcare, clean wa-

ter, and basic living needs in many Indigenous communities.

Hay’s book is a critique of the scientific settler colonial research conducted in Indigenous communities. He effectively uses the thrifty gene as an example of how toxic colonial research can be for Indigenous communities. The paratext surrounding Hay’s book includes a quote from Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punishment*, which encourages readers to consider the whole text as a reflection on the troublesome power dynamics in research projects involving Indigenous communities. Hay’s book incites productive outrage towards the unjust practices in Canada’s federal and provincial healthcare systems. Hay, an academic and researcher himself, asks fellow researchers and readers to reflect on their own positions and work with Indigenous communities. Hay’s book invites his readers to consider who benefits, and who is harmed, when settlers conduct extractive research within Indigenous communities.

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### *Partisan Odysseys* *Canada’s Political Parties*

By Nelson Wiseman

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. 240 pages. \$75.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper, ISBN 978-1-48750778-7 (cloth), 978-1-4875-2539-2 (paper). ([www.utorontopress.com](http://www.utorontopress.com))

Nelson Wiseman’s study of the history of the country’s political parties, *Partisan Odysseys: Canada’s Political Parties*, arrives in an era of declining party loyalty, increasing voter disillusionment with Canada’s federal political parties, and a sharp increase in the power of party leaders and non-elected officials to dictate everything

from policy agendas to local nominations.

Wiseman’s book is aimed at non-specialist students of Canadian politics and general readers who have some knowledge or are somewhat innocent of Canadian history, academic specialists, politically engaged citizens, journalists, and “anyone else who wants to know more about the

history of Canada's political parties, how they came to be, and what and whom they have represented." (viii) His book succeeds in providing a concise chronological narrative of Canadian political parties over nine chapters from before the introduction of responsible government through to the 2019 election.

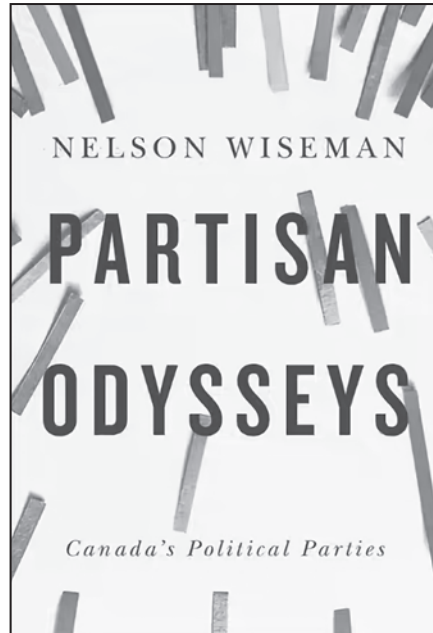
The book has a series of "motifs" that characterize different eras, be they competing nationalist narratives of the Conservatives and Liberals in the late nineteenth century, the rise of third parties after the end of the First World War, through to the entrenchment of regionalism in the 1990s, and the resurgence of a unified right wing conservatism under Stephen Harper (since fractured by the creation of the People's Party of Canada). Wiseman's past works have examined the Co-Operative Commonwealth Federation, New Democratic Party, and Social Credit in the twentieth century, and his coverage of the founding and rise to prominence (and often the decline) of these parties, in particular, reflects a deep engagement with these parties' leaders and their foundational economic and/or social causes.

Wiseman's narrative concludes with a very engaging chapter that offers what, frustratingly, could have been a far more useful format for the book as a whole: subsections on party democracy, party leadership, party membership, party finance, the role of the media, and party fidelity and voter volatility which would begin to

address the core issues that have allowed Canada's federal political parties to grow and change into their present state, and also would offer very real links to the past. Instead, what precedes this chapter is a study of a small group of political party leaders drawing primarily from a set of sources from before the 1990s.

By focussing on leaders and only a select number of "big" issues, which are well trod in first year politics classes and popular studies from Peter C. Newman among others, Wiseman fails to effectively show his target audience that federal political parties are "a critical connective link between the public and its government." (viii) At this juncture, a study that details how at almost no point in the history of Canada's political parties, arguably to this day, have they in fact been democratic, transparent, and responsive to the views of the public whom the purport to represent, would be an effective call to account and give such a text considerable purchase with those who are looking to engage on the issue of electoral reform.

A recent report co-authored by the Samara Centre for Democracy and the Consortium on Electoral Democracy found that across party affiliations, confidence in the federal government as an institution was up considerably between 2019 and May 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and before there was any line of sight on vaccines arriving in the near future.<sup>1</sup> While they caution that this may represent



only a distinct moment in time, this study points to a continued belief in the viability of the federal government as an institution, and the willingness of most Canadians to express their satisfaction with their democracy. Were Canadians to learn more about the history of their federal political parties, they might express both a disgust at past practices, and a renewed willingness to hold them accountable.

To enhance readability, the book would have benefitted from a table in each chapter, or perhaps as an appendix, that provides readers with key information about voting and elections: who could and could not vote (noting exclusions based on sex, property restrictions, ethnicity, immigration status, age, physical/ mental exclusions, criminal status, etc.), voter turnout (using return data whenever possible), how and when voting became more democratic and closed ballot, and changes to party financing. Instead, readers are mostly left in the dark about what it was like to vote in Canada in the nineteenth century, aside from learning that in the first elections following Confederation, adjacent constituencies in Toronto and York could vote six weeks apart with open voting conducted over two days and the results of the first day being known before the second day's ballots were cast. (16) By including more about the mechanics of voting, this book could have been a much more useful social and cultural study of Canada's political parties.

Women are almost entirely absent from Wiseman's narrative about the history of Canada's political parties as well. As is the case broadly, more attention is paid to Audrey McLaughlin and Alexa McDonough, past leaders of the New Democratic Party, than the efforts of women to hold office, to mobilize and organize votes in their ridings, and even to sway elections

by pushing specific policies and platforms. Wiseman notes in passing that Canada's federal elections following the extension of the franchise to most women in 1919 was followed by a series of minority governments, but attributes this not to a large influx of new voters but to leadership issues and the temporary electoral strength of the Progressive Party. (35) While not discounting the effect of a popular third party on national elections, there is much more that could be said about women's voting patterns, their influence on party platforms, and the changing roles of women in political parties. Instead, Wiseman's story of Canada's political parties is of leaders, those who helped maintain support for those leaders behind the scenes, male competition, and parties struggling to respond to the big issues of their times, all of which makes for an incomplete and unsatisfying picture.

While offering a concise narrative history of Canada's political parties, Wiseman's book is too often not willing to present new topics and issues in Canadian political history. A CBC news story published before the outset of the 2021-22 academic year suggested that there was a renewed sense of engagement with history courses and a desire by students for narratives that cover alternative topics and which do not focus on singular political leaders.<sup>2</sup> Readings that are designed for early engagement with the study of the past are an opportunity to meet student interest by covering topics that help them understand the past and make sense of the present.

Odysseus, the titular character of *The Odyssey*, wanders for ten years in his efforts to return home, encountering numerous perils and challenges that must be overcome before he can be reunited with his loved ones. Wiseman's book would have

done well to remember that sacrificing the divergent and episodic for the sake of a singular chronological narrative line to the near present leaves out too much of what

readers find interesting and what is crucial to the history of Canada's political parties.

Colin McCullough, Ph.D.

<sup>1</sup> Michael Mordon, *Temperature Check: Canadian Democratic Attitudes in a Pandemic* (Toronto: The Samara Centre for Democracy), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Jessica Wong, "History Students Hungry for a Broader, More Inclusive Portrait of the Past, 16 August 2021. *History students hungry for a broader, more inclusive portrait of the past* | CBC News

## *Jeannie's Demise*

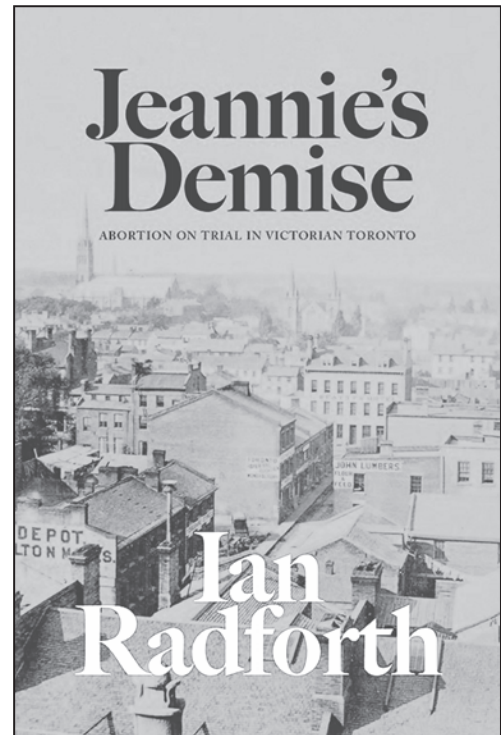
### *Abortion on Trial in Victorian Canada*

By Ian Radforth

Toronto: Between the Lines, 2020. 185 pages.  
\$29.95. ISBN 9781771135139. (btlbooks.com)

That access to legal abortion services remains an issue of debate in Canada in the early twenty-first century was made clear during the campaigns for the September 2021 federal election and the pressure for party leaders to identify their positions. Attention to reproductive rights in Canada furthermore was sparked in 2021 by recent events in the United States, specifically Texas's introduction of an almost complete ban on abortion, including cases in which pregnancy is the result of rape or incest. The fact that the most restrictive abortion law in the United States was passed in the same state where *Roe v. Wade* (1973) began highlights how contested and precarious access to safe abortion continues to be in the northern half of North America.

*Jeannie's Demise: Abortion on Trial in Victorian Canada* by Ian Radforth is a meticulous reconstruction of the story of a young unmarried woman who died in 1875 from a botched abortion in Toronto, Ontario. Weaving together an array of archival documents related to the history of one individual and the broader social land-



scape in which she lived, Radforth's retelling of Jeannie Gilmour's life and death is a grim and visceral reminder of the dangers women faced in Victorian Canada when both birth control and abortion were illegal. Contemporary issues are not delved into by Radforth in this relatively short book, yet the experiences of Gilmour, her death at age twenty-three, and the events and responses following her death provide