

C. Bruce Fergusson. W. S. Fielding. I: The Mantle of Howe. II: Mr. Minister of Finance

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Reviews

W. S. Fielding. I: The Mantle of Howe. II: Mr. Minister of Finance. C. Bruce Fergusson. Windsor, Lancelot Press, 1970 & 1971.

The Fielding biography has had a rather long and erratic history.¹ Even before Fielding died in 1929 some of his more devoted friends and political supporters, notably Adam Kirk Cameron, a Montreal industrialist, George Frederick Pearson, president of the Chronicle Publishing Co. Ltd., and Alexander Johnston, Deputy Minister of Marine and Fisheries, began collecting information on the significant events of his lengthy public career. Soon after Fielding died, they sought a competent biographer before time eliminated valuable oral evidence. Finally they persuaded Norman McLeod Rogers, then a professor of political science at Queen's, a Nova Scotian and a trusted Liberal, to undertake the task. Fielding's papers were sent to Roger's office at Queen's and with the hearty assistance of Cameron, Pearson and Johnston, he began a draft of the 'first' Fielding biography. Rogers however never completed the project. Besides his academic duties he took an active part in Liberal politics, served as counsel for the Nova Scotia government on a *Royal Commission Economic Inquiry*, and wrote a campaign biography of W. L. M. King. When King returned to power in 1935, Rogers joined his cabinet as Minister of Labour and in 1939 became Minister of National Defence, the portfolio he held until his untimely death in 1940.

Subsequently D. C. Harvey, the provincial archivist of the Province of Nova Scotia, whom Pearson and Johnston had consulted frequently on Fielding's early career, accepted an invitation to write a biography of Fielding.² But when "Advancing years and declining health prevented Dr. Harvey from doing more than drafting three or four chapters,"³ C. Bruce Fergusson, Harvey's successor, agreed to complete the work. Fergusson's present two volumes provide, at last, a biography of W. S. Fielding.

1 Adam Kirk Cameron, "Memorandum of Significant Events and Actions In The Life of Rt. Hon. William Stevens Fielding Prepared for Mr. Norman McL. Rogers" [n.d.], Alexander Johnston Papers, Public Archives of Canada (microfilm). I am obliged to Delphine Muise, National Museum of Man, Ottawa, for bringing to my attention and providing me with the documentation of the earlier efforts to write a Fielding biography.

2 The circumstances surrounding Fielding's "call to Ottawa" preoccupied the attention of Johnston and Pearson. D. C. Harvey wrote an article in *The Dalhousie Review*, 28 (1949) entitled "Fielding's Call To Ottawa," much of which is included in Fergusson's chapter "Wider Horizons." Soon after Fielding died the Hon. Benjamin Russell wrote an article on his "Recollections of W. S. Fielding," *Dalhousie Review*, 9 (1929-30), which dealt at some length with Fielding's earlier career, before he became Premier.

3 C. Bruce Fergusson, *The Mantle of Howe* (Windsor, 1970), I, p. 6.

In Fergusson's first volume, *The Mantle of Howe*, he describes W. S. Fielding "as the legitimate successor of Joseph Howe." He underlines the "striking similarities" between these two men's public careers, their humble origins, self-education, journalistic experience and rapid rise to power and position. Yet, apart from Fielding's affection for the memory of Howe, a fondness he shared with many of his contemporaries, his attacks on the baneful affect of federal policy, and his Imperial sympathies, it is difficult to understand precisely how Fergusson can suggest that Fielding "donned the Mantle of Howe." Indeed Fielding's character and personality, Fergusson admits, "were in some respects dissimilar" to that of Howe. Few historians would dispute that assertion. It is difficult to imagine anyone describing Fielding as obscene, reckless, indiscreet, vain and passionate or, on the other hand, eloquent, irresistible, creative and peerless, words used frequently to depict Howe. Contemporaries knew Fielding as a man of integrity, fidelity, soundness, wisdom and moderation, a good administrator, but feared rather than respected. He was also pragmatic, accomodating and conciliatory or, in the words of a political opponent, a cynical opportunist.⁴ He appeared to many as cautious, secretive, suspicious, prim and fussy. He was ever "that little grey man," the affectionate description of Rev. A. Robert George, the Minister of the Ottawa First Baptist Church. In short, Fielding's personality and political career probably bore greater resemblance to that of his colleague and later, leader, W. L. M. King, than to that of Joseph Howe.

Historians' judgment, their omissions and interpretations, rarely win the critical acclaim of all readers. Fergusson's biography is no exception. Although Fergusson faithfully narrates the chief political events of Fielding's provincial administration he totally neglects Fielding's association with the nascent provincial labour movement. During his provincial administration Fielding shrewdly cultivated an interest in industry and humanity which paid high political dividends. Soon after he became premier in 1884 he forged an alliance with the Provincial Workingman's Association, a predominately miner's union formed in 1879, and its General Secretary, Robert Drummond. When Drummond failed to secure election to the House of Assembly in 1886 and again in 1890, Fielding appointed him to the Legislative Council. The P.W.A., often considered a company union, made relatively moderate demands which Fielding readily met. Over a period of time, gently prodded by Drummond, Fielding introduced legislation which earned him an enviable reputation among the miners of the P.W.A.: fortnightly wages, mine inspectors, safety regulations, legislation forbidding lockouts before complaints were submitted to a commission of final arbitration, a minimum working age and night schools. Drummond, of course, considered Fielding's legislation "the most advanced . . . in the world."⁵ He later wrote that

4 Paul Bilkey, *Persons, Papers and Things* (Toronto, 1940), p. 103.

5 *Debates and Proceedings of the Legislative Council of Nova Scotia* (1894), p. 51.

nothing but praise can be expressed for the great interest taken and the aid extended to every effort whose object was the mental, social, material and physical welfare of the workers in the mines, especially that most numerous class, coal miners. Year after year in the eighties and nineties application was made to the government for this or that reform, and invariably the request met with a most sympathetic reception. The Fielding government have to their credit many many reforms sought for during a period of twenty or more years, or until the collier workiers were hard put to find further requests to profer In its legislation, relating to mining and allied subjects, the legislation of the eighties in N. S. set the pace even to Britain . . .⁶

Fielding's support of the miners' cause could scarcely be characterized as reckless or entirely altruistic. He also knew how to placate apprehensive mine owners. For example, when the general manager of the Acadia Coal Co., H. S. Poole, objected to legislation requiring mine officials to hold certificates of competence, Fielding simply named Poole chairman of the provincial board of examiners. Moreover, he displayed a comparable concern for the industrial development of Nova Scotia, a concern solidly endorsed by Drummond and his P.W.A., conscious of their dependence upon a thriving Nova Scotian economy. To improve the economic welfare and public revenue of the province, Fielding persuaded Henry M. Whitney to invest in the Cape Breton County coal fields, which led to the incorporation of the Dominion Coal Company. Fielding's generous terms aroused hostile criticism from the Conservative opposition, particularly its able leader, C. H. Cahan, who objected to the 99 year leases, the monopolistic nature of the terms and the dependence on American capital. Cahan's criticism forced Fielding to explain more clearly his industrial policy:

I believe the people will support any Government party that brings in capital and skill for the development of our mines . . . and I believe the people will not be particular whether that capital and skill comes from Great Britain or from any other part, provided only it comes.⁷

Fielding's determination to pursue the industrial development of Nova Scotia may also have influenced his choice of George Murray to succeed him as Premier in 1896, since Murray shared Fielding's concern for industrial development.⁸

Fergusson's second volume, *Mr. Minister of Finance*, offers no coherent interpretation of Fielding's federal career, particularly his relationship to French Canada. Granted Fielding's inscrutable character, the usual mystery surround-

6 Robert Drummond, *Minerals and Mining* (Stellarton, 1918), pp. 349-350.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 199.

8 J. P. Logan, "A Political Bayard," *The Canadian Magazine* (August, 1919), p. 340.

ing his portfolio, and his discreet, cautious conduct make his career difficult to explain. His pragmatic, flexible political approach suggest a man without strong political principles. He also possessed an overriding ambition to succeed, which seems partly to explain his reaction to the conscription crisis. Yet how can one account for his solid political reputation?

Dame Fortune seemed to follow Fielding nearly all the days of Laurier's administration. As the Minister of Finance Fielding received much credit for the rapid economic expansion which characterized the Laurier era. Indeed it would have been difficult to have been a bad minister of finance under such auspicious circumstances. The Government derived over 70% of its revenue from custom duties on imports, paid for by the vast influx of foreign capital which poured into Canada between the years 1901 and 1921⁹ and which owed little to government fiscal policy. After 1901 there was really very little to do but watch the surplus grow, gloat over the government's good fortune and turn it to political advantage. Fielding, it is true, made moderate changes in the tariff in 1897 and again in 1907, but the Conservatives' National Policy remained essentially unchanged under the Liberals. The true father of the Fielding tariff, as his moderate revisions were named, was not Fielding but Israel Tarte, the unrepentant *bleu* in the Liberal party, who prevented Fielding in 1897 from introducing substantial tariff changes. While Tarte remained in Laurier's cabinet he continued to be the most articulate proponent of what George Eulas Foster, in a very Keynesian sense, declared in 1894 to be the true task of a tariff, the development of a country's trade.¹⁰ In keeping with his free trade philosophy Fielding saw the tariff principally as a source of federal revenue, but he was also a pragmatic politician and so the tariff remained.

If Fielding was only the putative father of the Fielding tariff, he was the true father of reciprocity or, as Bourassa put it, "son dernier mort né:"¹¹ Fergusson devotes three chapters to Fielding's negotiations. Parliament's reaction to and the country's rejection of the trade treaty, Fielding's agreement proved a costly political error and so Fortune fled.

Fielding's solid reputation in the Liberal party cannot be attributed solely to chance. Fielding was a conscientious and able administrator, although inclined to procrastinate. He was also a man of blameless private and public morality, in contrast to some of his more high spirited colleagues, two or three of whom, Fielding confided to Lord Minto, deserved prison terms.¹² Despite Fielding's long years in public office, like Tarte, he remained a poor man; money did not stick to his fingers. But quite apart from these obvious virtues, people considered Fielding to be Laurier's successor almost by default. All of the strong men who had made Laurier's first administration the ministry of all

9 Kenneth Buckley, *Capital Formation in Canada* (Toronto, 1955), p. 66.

10 J. Harvey Perry, *Taxes, Tariffs and Subsidies* (Toronto, 1955), I, p. 96.

11 *Le Devoir*, 11 décembre 1913.

12 Diary, 14 May 1900, Minto Papers, National Library of Scotland.

the talents had left the cabinet by 1905, except Fielding, and Laurier failed to replace them with men of comparable talent, save for Aylesworth. Laurier, therefore, came to regard Fielding as his probable successor. According to Kirk Cameron, Fielding narrowly missed succeeding Laurier in 1908, when he persuaded Laurier to remain, at least for one more session, after which Fielding agreed to become Prime Minister. But, as Cameron observed, "a lot of water would go down the St. Lawrence between 1908 and 1910."¹³

After 1911 Laurier began to re-think the question of his succession and to consider other, younger candidates. Many men in the party blamed Fielding for the reciprocity fiasco and in Quebec his reputation had never been high. His stand on the autonomy bills and his close association with imperial preference and the naval bill had earned him the hostility of many Quebec nationalists.¹⁴ Moreover, after the 1911 elections, Laurier, now fully aware of nationalist strength in Quebec, began a slow retreat from his contentious naval policy. The high cost of living, the Free Food Forever slogan, became the rallying cry of his party. Laurier's own popularity began to grow in the province of Quebec, particularly among disillusioned nationalists, notably Henri Bourassa and his influential *Le Devoir*. But Fielding stubbornly refused to retreat from the old Liberal programme based on trade and defence. While Fielding was in England in the autumn of 1913, he went out of his way to explain publicly the Liberal's dormant naval policy and to defend the defunct trade agreement of 1911. Fielding's intransigence proved embarrassing to Quebec Liberals. They began to regard him as too old and too inflexible for the party leadership.

Laurier seemed to share their views, a fact he made painfully clear at the Fielding banquet on 9 December 1913, the significance of which Fergusson seems to miss entirely. The Liberal party had decided to give Fielding a large banquet to celebrate his arrival in Montreal as editor-in-chief of *The Daily Telegraph*. Over two hundred Liberals gathered, including prominent Liberals from other provinces, to honour the man often considered Laurier's legitimate political heir. Many people speculated that Laurier would use this occasion to announce his resignation and designate his successor. Although the hour was past midnight when he rose to speak, Laurier, in fine form, gave a fighting speech which aroused the admiration of his audience. He refused to relinquish the crown and went on to re-iterate forcefully his new policy and to remind his followers that, whatever past party policy had been, their first duty was to attack relentlessly the high cost of living. Instead of the leadership of the Liberal party Laurier offered Fielding the simple place of a deputy. Some party followers were astonished. "Pourquoi cette humiliation?"¹⁵ Bourassa asked rather rhetorically in *Le Devoir*. He answered his question by suggesting that Laurier wished to punish Fielding for his failure to fall into line behind the new

13 "Memorandum of Significant Events . . .", *op. cit.*

14 Armand LaVergne, *Trente Ans de Vie Nationale* (Montréal, 1934), p. 154.

15 *Le Devoir*, 12 décembre 1913.

policy. The Fielding banquet evoked from Bourassa a series of articles on the former Minister of Finance which revealed Fielding's poor reputation in Quebec. "L'ancien ministre des finances ne repond plus à ces exigences, physiquement," Bourassa wrote, and "je l'ai noté, il passerait facilement pour l'ainé de son chef." Fielding's ideas seemed even more dated: "Si le nouveau directeur de Telegraph le prend sur ce ton dans son journal, il fera bien de pousser la circulation dans le monde des archéologues et le royaume des Sept Dormants."⁶ The English language Montreal press remained equally unimpressed with Fielding's performance and drew unfavourable comparisons between Fielding and Laurier.⁷ Fielding's Montreal welcome lacked the warmth one might have expected for Laurier's successor.

The war widened the breach between Fielding and French Canada. His support for conscription and his desertion of the old Chief were never forgiven. Contrary to what Fergusson seems to assume, Fielding's "betrayal" of Laurier proved the greater offence among loyal Laurier Liberals. Throughout the conscription crisis Fielding consistently sought a middle way when there was no middle way. In the early summer of 1917 Fielding drafted a public letter, which he never published, justifying Laurier's refusal to join a coalition government, pleading for understanding of French Canada's opposition to compulsory military service and calling for a referendum on conscription. He readily altered his position, however, when Western Liberals began making peace with Borden. Fielding, conscious that Laurier was contemplating resignation, publicly endorsed the principle of a national government while withholding his approval of Borden's particular version. Union government. But, as support for the Union government began to grow among ranking Western and Ontario Liberals, Fielding again revised his position. He immediately sought to persuade Nova Scotian Liberals to join the movement to avoid being isolated. Later he approved A. K. MacLean's entry into the government and gave his full support, during the 1917 election, to Borden.

Fielding's 'betrayal' of Laurier is difficult to understand. The conscription issue alone scarcely explains Fielding's behavior, since many Laurier Liberals, particularly in Nova Scotia, endorsed it and still remained loyal. Laurier himself suggested three possible positions short of a clean break: opposition to conscription and the Union government; support of conscription but opposition to the Union government; or, the status of an independent Liberal.⁸ Fielding could easily have been accommodated within this flexible formula but he refused and chose instead to follow the majority of his party, hoping, perhaps, to play party peacemaker once the war was over. If so, his strategy failed, for whatever success this strategy brought him in other parts of English Canada, it won him little favour among Nova Scotian Liberals. Despite the

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Montreal Gazette*, 19 December 1913.

18 Laurier to E. M. Macdonald, 30 October 1917, Laurier Papers, Public Archives of Canada.

combined efforts of Borden, Murray, Fielding and the sobering effects of the great Halifax explosion only eleven days before the election, Laurier Liberals still gained 45.5% of the total popular vote. Nova Scotia Liberals, like their Quebec compatriots, would never forgive easily Fielding's betrayal. Laurier, however, did forgive Fielding. Anxious to heal the party's wounds, he decided in the end that Fielding would prove the party's best physician, but the master's followers would not consent.

Fielding's last years in public life, which Fergusson discusses in some detail, have a certain perverse charm. His strength at the Liberal convention and his subsequent popularity among the conservative wing of the party prevented W. L. M. King from ignoring him. He returned to his old post as Minister of Finance but he remained a party anachronism, heard but not heeded by King. Yet he could still be difficult. He disapproved of Canada's seeking separate representation at the Paris Peace Conference and its obsession with status. He opposed the idea of Canadian representation in Washington and his government's insistence on signing treaties. Although he feared above all that we were "on the very verge of independence"¹⁹, he wrote a six stanza version of "O Canada" and designed a new Canadian flag, since he considered the red ensign inappropriate because it was a sea flag "more suggestive of the red flag of the communists than of anything Canadian."²⁰ His world remained the world of pre-war Canada. The little grey man, who had, in the past, too frequently chosen the path of silence and compliance, in his old age refused to make peace with the new era.

J. W. Longley once described Fielding, probably quite accurately, as a great little man.²¹ He possessed most of the qualities and many of the stereotyped personal characteristics of a good deputy minister. Ambition seemed to dominate his public career. He would, no doubt, have called it the desire for public service and to a certain extent, he would have been right. But office soon became an end rather than a means "and if a still, small voice was heard at times by him, he silenced it ruthlessly."²² There is a certain irony in the fact that Fielding was beaten in his attempt to attain the leadership of his party by a younger version of himself, W. L. M. King.

This biography contains much information on the chief events of Fielding's career gleaned from his letters, information which is often available in printed secondary sources. It contains a number of factual errors. For example, in 1917 Fielding was not "the only candidate in the Province to become a member of Parliament without an election contest." Three other candidates, F. B. McCurdy, A. K. MacLean and P. F. Martin, were also returned unopposed. A number of typographical errors mar the text. Subjects are often intruded into

19 Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 21 April 1921, III, p. 2391.

20 Fergusson, *op. cit.*, II, p. 231.

21 Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 335.

22 Bilkey, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

the narrative without introduction. The biography contains relatively little analysis and since Fergusson makes little attempt to place Fielding's career in the context of his times, the significance of Fielding's words and actions, which often receive very detailed attention, are completely lost. The author seems to have made relatively little use of the available recent secondary literature, particularly in the economic field. Not all Canadian historians would agree that there was a Great Depression in Canada from 1873 until 1896, nor would all American historians agree that by 1893 "The American West has filled up." The biography also lacks an index. A bibliography, with a brief description of the Fielding papers, would have been extremely helpful. Canadian scholars have awaited this biography, sometimes impatiently, since Fielding's papers, located in the Provincial Archives of Nova Scotia, have been almost totally closed pending its completion. Professor C. Bruce Fergusson's two volume study will undoubtedly stimulate further interest and study of W. S. Fielding.

CARMAN MILLER

Canadian Provincial Politics: Party Systems of the Ten Provinces. Edited by Martin Robin. Scarborough, Prentice-Hall of Canada, 1972.

There are two ways of producing a book of readings: to commission a group of authors each to write on a part of the subject in question, or to excerpt and edit from already written materials a selection of articles. The former produces original material prepared specifically for the book in question, so the pieces can be planned to form an integrated whole. However, this assumes that the editor has selected his authors wisely, and is prepared to insist that they follow a carefully elaborated and integrated schema, that they produce their work on time, and that they maintain a high standard of writing and scholarship. Even then he must be prepared to use his editorial pencil severely and reject material that is sub-standard. These are conditions so demanding that few authors would tolerate them, and virtually no editor would take the trouble. It would be easier to write the book himself — or edit existing material with a free hand — nobody's feelings are hurt since he doesn't know he is being judged.

This book shows up clearly the problems of the first method, despite the fact that the authors are, in most cases, the most suitable people to write about their particular province. However, each appears to have been turned loose to do his own thing without instructions or specific requirements. The result is an uneven collection that does not permit the reader to make any kind of significant comparison between provinces — because the methods used and the aspects dealt with vary so greatly. And the whole simply does not hang together.

If these strictures are too hard on the editor because his authors were too independent and strong willed, he can still not be forgiven for not seeing that some overall analysis of the provincial party systems was included. The whole