

Grit: The Life and Politics of Paul Martin Sr. by Greg Donaghy

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Volume 108, numéro 2, fall 2016

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1050607ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050607ar>

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Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

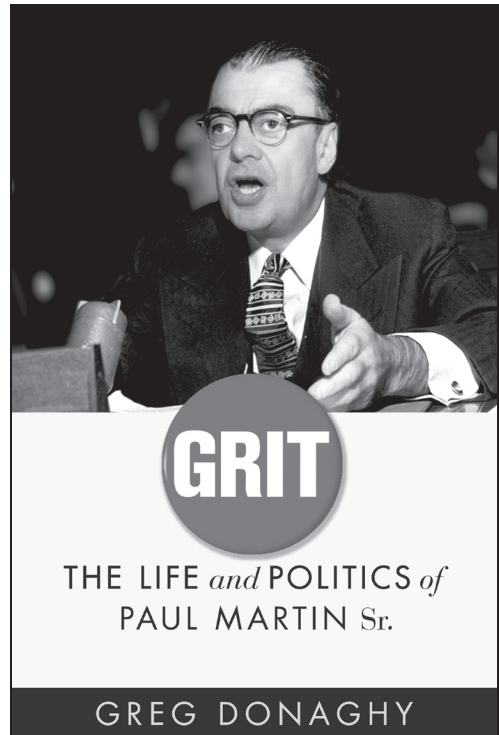
Bryden, P. (2016). Compte rendu de [*Grit: The Life and Politics of Paul Martin Sr.* by Greg Donaghy]. *Ontario History*, 108(2), 277–278.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1050607ar>

Grit
The Life and Politics of
Paul Martin Sr.
 by Greg Donaghy

Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2015. 489 pages. ISBN: 9780774829113 (hardcover, \$39.95).

What a wonderful title this is for a book about the original Paul Martin, now necessarily “Sr.” thanks to his son’s own political career. A Grit of the old school, meaning pure left-wing Ontario reformer, Paul Martin the father represented Windsor for the Liberals in the House of Commons for close to half a century; he also showed grit, or determination, in carrying out his responsibilities in the Ministries of Health and External Affairs through the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, pushing through policies in the face of sometimes extraordinary opposition; he also was the grit, or irritant, in the political lives of various Liberal and Conservative colleagues, never far from the action despite repeated half-insults or quasi-failures. So *Grit* is the perfect title to this lovely, lively book about an important Canadian politician whose story is told poignantly, as it should be, for as determined as Martin was, his legacy has more of a gritty residue than a lustrous finish.

The apple of his mother’s eye, Paul Martin was the oldest son in a devoutly Catholic eastern Ontario family. Saved from death by polio in 1907 at the age of 4 by his mother’s fervent prayers, Paul seemed to have benefitted from divine intervention. At the very least, his survival indicated an early determination that would characterize the remainder of his long life. Planning on becoming a priest, he attended a “petit séminaire” in Gatineau and emerged three years later convinced that the priesthood was not



for him but also with a new identity as a French Canadian nationalist. Armed thus, he headed first to the University of Toronto, then to Osgoode Hall Law School, and then to Harvard and Cambridge. Along the way, he acquired important friends and supporters (like the warden of Hart Hall, Burgon Bickersteth), some useful public speaking and debating skills, and a driving political ambition. His first flirtation with politics—a run at the solidly-Conservative provincial riding of North Renfrew, which included his hometown of Pembroke—was a disaster. The incumbent “pummelled” Martin, but the young man nevertheless has established both his Liberal credentials and his ambition (20).

Ambition is an important theme that runs through Martin’s life, and through Donaghy’s masterful biography. Martin would not experience the defeat of Renfrew North again; after returning from

Cambridge, he established both a law practice and a family in Windsor, another community with strong French and Catholic roots, and then squeaked out a victory in the federal election of 1935. In Ottawa, he soon made a mark as a “shrewd and effective parliamentarian,” and by 1945 was popular enough in Windsor to score an absolute majority (45).

The voters of Windsor liked the personal touch that Paul Martin brought to politics. He worked the phones, remembered people’s names, and made sure that Windsor wasn’t forgotten in the larger distribution of government largesse. They also liked his brand: he was a hard-working reformer who played key roles in securing the Canadian Citizenship Act and, once promoted to Minister of National Health and Welfare, more generous old age pension benefits and the preliminary steps toward full national health insurance. But if these were actions and ideals that endeared him to the voters, they often alienated him from his colleagues in Ottawa. Too obviously a “retail” politician, Martin was easily dismissed and occasionally ridiculed. Prime Minister King made fun of Martin’s too-speedy acceptance of the offer of a cabinet position (80), and newspaper reports often treated Martin as if he was simply acting on the advice of a more powerful colleague (103).

It was Martin’s soaring ambition in regards to the leadership of the Liberal party, however, that aroused the most censure. In 1948, he bungled a leadership bid that King was doing everything in his power to orchestrate in favour of Justice Minister Louis St. Laurent, with the resultant humiliation and sense, on the part of his critics, “that he would allow personal goals to overwhelm his political judgment” (96). Against overwhelming support for the former Minister of External Affairs and

Nobel Peace Prize recipient Lester Pearson, Martin threw his hat in the ring again in 1958. In part, at least, Martin was campaigning against the injustice that dictated the party could not have another Catholic or French Canadian in office, but he was also responding to the “expectations that his strong and long-held ambitions had created” among his friends and supporters (163). It was another miserable loss. His final leadership defeat—in 1968, to the enigmatic Pierre Trudeau—came after the 64-year old man, with dyed hair and an obviously outdated message of “generalities and evasions” (313), slumped in the face of what seemed to be “real” change.

This is a biography of one of the most important Canadian politicians of the twentieth century. He spearheaded important initiatives not only at home in the areas of social policies, but also abroad where his skills were often overshadowed by those of Lester Pearson. He relentlessly pressed the centrists in the Liberal party to shift to the left, and even when he was depicted as old and out of touch, he was never regarded as “conservative” in anything other than attire. But the real accomplishments that mark Paul Martin Sr.’s career are often overshadowed by his relentless need for more. Ambition he had in abundance, but Greg Donaghy paints a picture of a man whose ambition never superseded his fundamental decency, his connection to individuals both great and small, and his unwavering loyalty to colleagues, constituents and indeed a country that often treated him with something less than loyalty. This is both a fascinating study of twentieth-century Canada and the somewhat poignant story of a boy with big dreams.

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