

The Life and Death of Norman McLeod Rogers by Barry Cahill

Kevin Brushett

Volume 115, numéro 1, spring 2023

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1098789ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1098789ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Brushett, K. (2023). Compte rendu de [*The Life and Death of Norman McLeod Rogers* by Barry Cahill]. *Ontario History*, 115(1), 142–143.

<https://doi.org/10.7202/1098789ar>

study relates that a patient was taunted by other children on the ward for being a “charity brat” (377), but Burke offers little assessment of these class issues. Burke also wholly ignores race in her analysis. She relates the case studies of several Indigenous children, for example, but provides no analysis of how race may have influenced their admission or their experience in the sanatorium. The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which addresses tuberculosis extensively, is not

listed in her bibliography, nor does she engage meaningfully with historical scholarship on histories of health and marginalized communities. Given the population of Toronto, there were likely also Black patients admitted to the hospital, but there is no discussion of this in the book or of the racism that racialized patients would have faced in such an institution.

Erin Millions
Public Historian

The Life and Death of Norman McLeod Rogers

by Barry Cahill

Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2022. 144 pages. £62.99 softcover. ISBN 978-1-5275-8919-3 (www.cambridgescholars.com)

Working at the Royal Military College of Canada and living in Kingston just a stone’s throw from the airport named in his honour, Barry Cahill’s biography of Norman Rogers intrigued me. According to Cahill, although Rogers’s public career lasted a mere five years, his rise from reluctant academic to cabinet minister was nothing short of meteoric. Indeed, Cahill claims that had Rogers not died in a tragic plane accident in June 1940 he likely would have succeeded Mackenzie King as Liberal leader.

Born in Amherst, Nova Scotia into a prominent Conservative family, many believed Rogers would follow his family into law and politics. While the latter was true the former was not. Rather than going into the law Rogers became a professor of history at Acadia and later political science at Queen’s University. Although Cahill notes that Rogers was a successful and well-liked professor, his real calling was politics. In 1927 he left academia to become secretary

for cabinet relations with the King Liberal government. It was here Cahill claims that King took a shine to Rogers and became his political mentor.

However, King’s defeat in 1930, forced Rogers to return to academia, taking up a position in the Political Science department at Queen’s University. Queen’s at that time was the centre of the “new liberalism” that provided the intellectual groundwork for the activist state that would characterize postwar Canada. Although Cahill claims that Rogers was a progressive liberal, he does not really flesh out his thinking or his relationship with his fellow Queen’s new liberals. With his eyes still set on a political career, Rogers immersed himself in the Kingston riding association where he became the party’s candidate in the 1935 elections. In those elections he astonishingly defeated the long-standing Conservative candidate by more than 1,000 votes.

Even though he had no previous political experience, King selected him as his

Minister of Labour entrusting him with the government's most difficult and important task: helping millions of Canadians get back to work. Rogers' chief contribution as minister was the creation of the National Employment Commission (NEC). However, Cahill concludes that the NEC was a failure, in large part because its main recommendation that the federal government assume responsibility for unemployment relief put him in direct conflict with his more politically cautious boss. Indeed, Cahill notes it probably cost him appointment as the Minister of Finance in the next government.

Instead, King appointed Rogers as Minister of National Defence, another important position for which he had no experience. Cahill claims that although he tirelessly devoted himself to his duties, Rogers was not "physically up" to being Minister of National Defence. Cahill, however, never provides evidence to back this claim other than Rogers' slight stature. We will never know if Cahill's claims are true not only because his life was cut short by a tragic air accident, but because Rogers was minister during the "Phony War" period before Canadian soldiers, sailors, and aircrew participated in the deadly and difficult task of defeating Nazi Germany.

Cahill's study of Rogers is interesting and adds to what we know about the inter-

nal dynamics of the King government during depression and war. There are, however,

substantial shortcomings. The first is Cahill's assertion that Rogers would have become King's successor. While King entrusted Rogers with two very important ministries for which he had no experience, he also notes that Rogers' reform proclivities often "embarrassed" King. In addition, readers get little information about Rogers' relationships with his cabinet colleagues who would have much to say about the leadership succession. Sec-

ond, and more important, the study could do with substantial editing. There are far too many long block quotes, often from secondary source literature. While this is likely due to the paucity of archival records available to flesh out Rogers' life and career, Cahill would have been better to use that space to discuss Rogers' progressive liberalism. Here he certainly could have drawn upon the insights of other scholars such as Barry Ferguson's *Remaking Liberalism*, which examines Rogers' contemporaries at Queen's, or Douglas O'ram's *Government Generation*. While political biography remains an important window into the past, it should be enlivened by broader social, cultural, and intellectual insights.

Kevin Brushett
Royal Military College of Canada

The Life and Death of Norman McLeod Rogers



Barry Cahill