

A Pair of Kings

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Reviews/Revues

A Pair of Kings

VERY FEW CANADIAN ACADEMICS write autobiographies. To cite those in my collection, there are *Bladen on Bladen: Memoirs of a Political Economist* (1978); *Nil Alienum: The Memoirs of C.B. Sissons* (1964); *My Life and Work: A Happy Partnership: Memoirs of J.A. Corry* (1981); A.R.M. Lower's *My First Seventy-five Years* (1967); *A Slice of Canada: Memoirs by Watson Kirkconnell* (1967); Claude Bissell's *Halfway Up Parnassus* (1974); *The Polish Memoirs of William John Rose* (1975); and going back into the dark ages, *My Windows on the Street of the World* (1923) by James Mavor, Ph. D. That is far from being a bookshelf's worth, and for some of the most distinguished scholars of our past, all we have are collected essays or *festschriften* with one or perhaps two papers on the honoured academician.¹

Why? Is it that Canadian scholars are naturally reticent, men and women who knew and know their place and doff their cap to their betters, so to speak, by remaining discreetly silent? Or is it just that until recently there were so few academics *in toto* and so very few who wrote anything at all in any genre that the odds kept the volume of autobiographical writing strictly limited? Perhaps it is simply that professors are a dull lot, men and women who go through their daily grind in the classroom and who get the excitement in their lives out of arcane discoveries in the archives, the study, or the laboratory. Nothing in that kind of life could merit an autobiography.

These two books, both published in 1983, demonstrate that this gloomy analysis is not always true. Two historians, both largely educated in Canada and both with interesting stories to tell, have violated the profession's code and told their stories. Charles Stacey will be familiar to all Canadianists; Harry Ferns, most of whose academic career was passed in the United Kingdom as a specialist on Anglo-Argentinian affairs, will be less so, but he will spring to mind as the author of an early, debunking biographer of Mackenzie King.

The two books are very different, and neither is truly autobiography in the full sense. Stacey's *A Date With History: Memoirs of a Canadian Historian* (Ottawa, Deneau Publishers, 1983) omits "many things that would have interested only me and my friends. It is an account of my life as an historian . . .". Ferns' book, *Reading from Left to Right: One Man's Political History* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1983), is as the title suggests, a tracing of the author's journey from being a Communist in the 1930s to being a militant member of "the government that governs least governs best" school. There is

1 For instance, A.B. McKillop, ed., *Contexts of Canada's Past: Selected Essays of W.L. Morton* (Toronto, 1980), F.H. Underhill, *In Search of Canadian Liberalism* (Toronto, 1960), Donald Creighton: *The Passionate Observer: Selected Writings* (Toronto, 1980), H.L. Dyck and H.P. Crosby, *Empire and Nations: Essays in Honour of Frederic H. Seward* (Toronto, 1970), and M.S. Cross and R. Bothwell, eds., *Policy by Other Means: Essays in Honour of C.P. Stacey* (Toronto, 1972).

very little history in Ferns' book and very little politics in Stacey's; in neither will a reader discover anything much about their families or their lives. Those are flaws, perhaps, but we should be grateful for what we do get.

And what we get is fascinating enough. Stacey was born in Toronto in 1906, Ferns on the Prairies in 1913. Both received their undergraduate training in this country, Stacey at Toronto and Ferns at Manitoba. Both went abroad to continue their studies, Stacey to do a second B.A. at Oxford and his doctorate at Princeton, and Ferns, after a Queen's M.A., to Cambridge. Both did war work. Stacey was the Army historian overseas, an opportunity that gave him unrivalled access to the generals, to some of the politicians, and to the records. Ferns was a minor official in the Prime Minister's Office and in the Department of External Affairs, also a good chance to meet and impress the important. Stacey, it is fair to say, did impress his superiors, while Ferns, quite clearly on his own evidence did not. Ferns was too much a man of the left to make it in Canadian academe in the immediate postwar years, and he was even denied a job at Royal Roads Services College apparently because of the direct intervention of Brooke Claxton, the Minister of National Defence, who evidently wanted to protect cadets from political confusion and contamination. Disgusted, Ferns left Canada for England. With many vicissitudes on the way, both Stacey and Ferns grew old in their profession, writing important books and retiring weighted down with honours.

They have more in common than that, however. Stacey and Ferns both wrote books on Mackenzie King, the only point in their careers that they truly touch (neither appears in the index of the other's book). Both studies were harshly critical of King. With Bernard Ostry as co-author, Ferns' book, *The Age of Mackenzie King: The Rise of the Leader*, appeared in 1955 at a time when the primary sources — except for the Laurier, Lemieux, and Murphy papers and one or two other collections — were simply unavailable. That did not prevent the authors from doing a hatchet job on King's early life, one that painted the young Willie as a man on the make who would stop at nothing in his trimming and hedging to get ahead. It was all true, but somehow it was less than the whole truth. Stacey's *A Very Double Life: The Private World of Mackenzie King* (1976) appeared after almost all the records were open to scholars, and its impact was simply devastating. For the first time a respected and senior historian subjected King's spiritualism to an unblinking and hostile gaze, dealt with his (alleged) dealings with prostitutes and women generally, and looked at King's finances. The shock was profound — and if students today know anything at all about Mackenzie King, their knowledge is invariably filtered through Stacey's lens (until such time as the more lurid account in Heather Robertson's recent *Willie: A Romance* (1983) reaches the high schools).

Neither book was very satisfactory, certainly not the best work of the authors. Stacey was a military historian, an expert analyst of battles, strategy and war-time policy; he was no sexologist or psychoanalyst, however, and it showed.

Ferns and Ostry were diligent researchers, but their lack of access to the King papers and diaries hampered them severely, even if it did not stop them from making sweeping judgements. And yet both Ferns and Stacey will be best known for their King books, long after their truly important research moulders on the shelves. That bad money drives out good is a well-known economic law; apparently it also applies to history too.

Curiously both men have modified their earlier views of King. Ferns now readily admits that King was a truly able prime minister, “miles ahead of any of the active participants in politics”, and he recognizes the extent to which King’s reputation has suffered because of the availability of his diaries. “It will take a long time to rescue the reputation of Mckenzie King from the psychologists and the pornographers” — is that a shot at Stacey? — “and to leave it to the judgment of those interested in what is truly relevant in the man: his activity as a Canadian politician in a period of extreme political disturbance”.

Stacey admits to no reflections or second thoughts. He notes the historical profession’s “marked reluctance” to accept *A Very Double Life* “as a serious contribution to biography, which it was intended to be and I think is. I decline to be ashamed of it”, he says, adding that “on the contrary, I am not ill pleased with it . . .”. But the King who features so largely in Stacey’s two-volume *Canada and the Age of Conflict* (1977, 1981) is a very different man indeed. Granted Stacey is treating policy there, not King’s stunted sex life or the “little rapping table”, but it is still difficult to accept that the same man wrote both studies. But that is enough of Mackenzie King.

Ferns’ book is in some ways more interesting than Stacey’s, largely because it conveys a sense of intellectual growth that, while not missing from the military historian’s, is not stressed there. Ferns’ conversion to Marxism — at the hands of a retired major in the Indian Army on board a liner to England — brought him into contact with the very active politics at Cambridge in the 1930s. He was closely involved with a group some of whose members have since become infamous for their treason, and he did the Communist Party’s work in recruiting and argumentation. His account of Cambridge in the late 1930s is as good as anything yet written on that hothouse atmosphere where the best and the brightest all seemed to have supported the left as the only possible bulwark against Hitler and his supporters in reactionary circles in Britain and France (and Canada and the United States). Our fault, Ferns writes,

was our failure to break sufficiently or radically enough with the underlying optimistic and complacent assumptions of liberal constitutionalism. We did not sufficiently appreciate the black evil of which human beings are capable particularly in their political relations, and we assumed as natural and took for granted modes of behaviour in the sphere of politics which are only frail and temporary achievements of moral understanding. Bitterly hostile as many of us were to Fascism and Nazism it is fair to say

that none of us could imagine Belsen or Auschwitz, and while a large majority in Cambridge were anything but Communists, there can have been very few who were willing to believe that Stalin was a blood-thirsty tyrant. There was so much in the intellectual life of Cambridge which was creative, positive, and satisfying that it required almost superhuman understanding and insight to assert that, for all their achievements, men and women could be and were then in the process of becoming unredeemed brutes (p. 81).

What finally began to turn Ferns decisively away from Communism was a wartime letter from a Cambridge acquaintance, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who argued that it was “simply disingenuous to talk of Nazism as the last resort of entrenched capitalism”. The differences between Nazism and liberal capitalism, the American historian said, “were far greater than between Nazism and Communism”. That troubled Ferns, but so too did Schlesinger’s argument that force and political mobilization were autonomous factors in historical development. If that was so, what significance then did Marxist “laws” of history hold? What was left of “the comforting certainty that everything will be put right by the triumph of the working class and the construction of a socialist and finally a communist order?” For Ferns, the road led to the right wing, though not without interesting byways. What is impressive is that he does not scourge himself for his earlier views. In effect, he says, he was right in the 1930s, and if his views changed as he grew older and wiser, so too did the world change.

Two additional sections in Ferns’ book are of great interest. One deals with Herbert Norman, the Canadian Marxist scholar of Japan who served in the Department of External Affairs from the beginning of the war until his death in Cairo in 1957 by suicide, a victim of McCarthyite persecution. Fern gives us the best look at Norman as a man that we have, and he is unconvincing only when he says that his friend could not have been a spy, as some have claimed, if only because he would not have been on good terms with such an open leftist as Ferns. That Ferns could think such specious reasoning convincing is puzzling. Equally as memorable as the Norman account is Ferns’ story of his collaboration with Bernard Ostry in writing the King book. This is vintage venom, a bitter and cutting (and funny) assault on a former friend (and one, rumours suggest, that was much toned down on the instructions of the publisher’s lawyers). Ostry was the researcher and Ferns the writer, but Ostry, Ferns says, wanted to have his name listed first. “Inasmuch as I had initiated the project and written every word of the text”, Fern states, “I demurred”. Thus far, there has been no public rebuttal by Ostry. Perhaps Ferns’ savage comparison of Ostry’s book, *The Cultural Connection* (1978), with Mackenzie King’s *Industry and Humanity* dissuaded him: “Critics have dismissed it just as critics dismissed *Industry and Humanity*. There is, however, no reason why Bernard Ostry should not dominate the Age of Taste as Mackenzie King dominated the Age of Unrest and

War. As a youth, Bernie learned to spend his father's money on culture. Why should he not go on to spend Canada's money to the same end?"

If Ferns is often vicious, so too is Stacey. Ordinarily it is the politicians who suffer under the Colonel's lash, notably the same Claxton who sent Ferns to England and who delayed the issuance of Stacey's official Army history of the Second World War and tried to vet the manuscript. But others take their blows too. Donald Creighton, for example, claimed not to read reviews of his books but nonetheless complained to Stacey about remarks in his review of the Macdonald biography. "I always managed to keep on pretty good terms with Donald", Stacey says, "but I did so only at the cost of keeping my sense of humour working overtime. He frequently insulted me; but then, I think, he insulted practically everybody". Stacey adds that Creighton was disliked by all the senior members of Toronto's history department, and Frank Underhill, who "hated his insides", resigned instantly when Creighton was made chairman. A fair man, however, Stacey notes that Underhill's action was "highly unprofessional . . . at the moment when there was no time to find a replacement before the beginning of the next term". There is more academic historians' gossip in Stacey than in Ferns.

There is also more about the way history is researched and written. Stacey provides a good account of how he got into his sources and of the difficulties he faced from the political and military figures who featured in the official histories. He talks about the Historical Section he created at National Defence Headquarters (and in which I served for a brief period), but he says nothing about how the Section was probably the best finishing school in the country for a young historian. It was a great opportunity to pass thesis chapters around a group that included Stacey, D.J. Goodspeed and J.M. Hitsman. Military history has never been popular with academics in Canada, but under Stacey the Historical Section (General Staff) was a small but able and solid publishing group, far more impressive than the vastly more swollen (and much less productive) empire now functioning as the Directorate of History.

Still, military history alone would not have given Stacey his reputation as a great Canadian historian. His war books and his studies of military policy in the 19th century and of the battle of Quebec in 1759 were well regarded by specialists but almost overlooked by most practising historians. There was no great thesis there, I remember one young and brash historian saying. That was true enough, but what was present in the official histories, for example, was splendid prose, fine research, careful judgments, and as clear an account of the greatest national endeavour of the Canadian people as we will ever have. That was enough, but it is still satisfying that Stacey now is generally conceded to be one of the very best historians Canada has produced — even if that judgment is based rather too much on *A Very Double Life!*

Stacey himself offers some characteristically pungent views on the necessity for historians to write well. History, he says, "is a branch of literature or it is

next to nothing. The most indefatigable researcher in the world is like a dumb man if he cannot communicate his results. Inability to communicate, indeed, is what keeps so many academic historians mute and inglorious; nobody read the work of the semi-literate, which is what some of them are close to being". That is all true, a fair description of our colleagues and of the profession's determination to go the way of the political scientists into unreadable gobbledegook. So too are Stacey's diatribes against the new social historians who "have had little use for anything else", and on the new fashions in history: "it has been a standing joke among the older generation that to be anybody nowadays you must work on women, North American Indians or blacks; preferably all three. Women's history in particular . . . seems to be in danger of drowning in its own popularity".

In other words, both Stacey and Ferns are curmudgeons, each in his own unique way. They have their likes and their hates and, now that they are in their maturity, they have few qualms about letting off salvos. Both, of course, had little hesitation about letting off broadsides when they were younger too. The heavy shelling of their enemies' trenches makes both books fun to read, and Stacey's is much more of a professional historians' book. Ferns', on the other hand, has its object lessons as well.

J.L. GRANATSTEIN

David Alexander's Vision of Canada

THOSE WHO QUESTION THE SOCIAL "UTILITY" of historical studies would do well to read the nine essays collected in David Alexander, *Atlantic Canada and Confederation: Essays in Canadian Political Economy* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1983). This is not a work of pure history, but it is the thought of a working historian as he addresses problems facing Canada, the Atlantic Provinces, and especially Newfoundland. Compiled after his death in 1980 by his friends and colleagues Eric Sager, Lewis Fischer and Stuart Pierson, this volume reflects the range of David Alexander's intellectual pursuits. Several pieces are academic studies; others are political and social commentaries; one is a convocation address. The old tie between history and philosophy is vigorously reaffirmed in this book as Alexander skilfully integrates economics, politics — even the moral philosophy of Billie Holiday — to sustain his argument. Brought together in order to represent what was best and most enduring in his thought,