

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

Williams, David Ricardo. *Mayor Gerry: The Remarkable Gerald Gratton McGeer*. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1986. Pp. 319. \$24.95.

Blumenfeld, Hans. *Life Begins at 65: The Not Entirely Candid Biography of a Drifter*. Montreal: Harvest House, 1987. Pp. 328. \$24.95 cloth; \$15.00 paper.

Biography remains the heart and soul of histories of the senior political jurisdictions. It is a rare commodity at the local. There, patterns and institutions loom rather larger than the players. Structure takes precedence over agency.

Players at the senior levels may actually have influence over event and structure. Or the little influence they do have has more impact on the larger stage. Their lives are at least perceived to be of remark, one way or the other. But the perception remains, I think, an unexamined premise in the history and political science of our time. More likely, such production at the senior levels is more the function of superior record keeping. At the local level there is rarely enough material on which to hang a tale. And often there is found to be more than one tale to tell.

The other tales are often of greater note than the life in politics. Charlotte Whitton's municipal career, for example, generally takes a back seat to her lives as a welfare worker and a public woman. And where the life in local politics was preeminent, most tales remain untold, at least in academic biography. Camillien Houde, of Montreal, is an example.

Neither the McGeer biography nor the Blumenfeld memoir are what might be called authoritative texts, but both offer a rare insight into the world of local politics and administration (if planning in the world of Hans Blumenfeld can be so termed).

McGeer and Blumenfeld were curious contemporaries, both young men in the First Great War, McGeer fashioning his career as a Vancouver lawyer and politician, Blumenfeld caught up in the politics and violence of Central Europe and about to launch a remarkable career as planner that would carry him from Germany to Moscow, New York, Philadelphia and finally Toronto, where, nearing retirement (for most) was engaged as a main player in the planning of Metropolitan Toronto. McGeer had by then died, but in his flamboyant inter-war career had become an MLA, MP, Senator, and twice Mayor of Vancouver.

Williams' biography of McGeer is good work by a former lawyer and now writer and teacher. It has some quite remarkable parts, in particular the correspondence between McGeer and his wife; which documents perhaps more than anything else the toll levied by ambition and politics on fam-

ily life. Its chief flaw, I believe, is a lack of concern for context at whatever level of government the subject of the biography was operating, or even as a young lawyer in the swirling Liberal politics of early twentieth century Vancouver. Certainly there is little, for example, to explain either why McGeer won in 1935 as mayor or failed to run in 1937. At least some of the documentation is there. The indications are that the author was not aware of it. A good book, but one really half done.

The same might be said of Blumenfeld's memoir. Perhaps with such fascinating subject matter, it is not surprising that both authors tend to concentrate on the life. Blumenfeld's perspective from the eye of the interwar hurricane is fascinating. One wishes, however, he had brought more of that perspective to the sections on planning. What was going on in his head as he planned Toronto, especially, would have been rather useful to the students of that city. That is not to say there was nothing for there was a good deal, but this reader yearned for rather more, especially how (or if) the cumulative details of a rich life impinged on the planning of a city, and how (or if) the city influenced the man. What was the relationship of the artifact and the man?

Despite this negative comment, both are good books to read, and Blumenfeld's is especially rich in both its writing and its insights. Perhaps these two represent a beginning of building the biographies and memoirs that would complement the rich work increasingly available on city structure and pattern. It is a pattern largely the reverse of that prevailing at the senior levels. It is also perhaps the occasion to examine the usefulness of biography standing alone. In both these cases the context must be supplied by the reader: the authors do not. The format is that of an older tradition of biography and memoir. It could usefully be abandoned.

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Veltman, Colin, in collaboration with Odette Paré. *L'insertion sociolinguistique des Québécois d'origine portugaise*. Etudes et documents no. 44. Montreal: Institut national de la recherche scientifique — Urbanisation, 1985. Pp. 104.

For those interested in the evolution of the «rapports des communautés culturelles québécoises avec leurs concitoyens francophones et anglophones» and the changes that have taken place during the past ten years, this is an informative and well-documented study on the language choices of the