

Ego and Autobiography: Three Political Memoirs

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Reviews/Revue

Ego and Autobiography: Three Political Memoirs

“IF YOU DO NOT WANT TO explore an egoism you should not read autobiography”. So wrote H.G. Wells in his own autobiography in 1934.¹ Those interested in Canadian egos will find them amply displayed in the recently published memoirs of three Canadian politicians. The combined egoism of William J. Browne, Donald Fleming and Paul Martin runs to more than 3400 pages and costs nearly \$180 in hardcover. Two of the three authors promise more to come. Even those egoists of an earlier generation, Charles Tupper, George Foster and Richard Cartwright, did not have the audacity to extend their musings beyond one volume.² The sheer mass of material offered by Messrs. Browne, Fleming and Martin, of course, has Canadian precedents in the memoirs of John Diefenbaker, Lester Pearson and Robert Borden and in the diaries of that all-time master of the written word Mackenzie King.³ Civil servants in recent years have also shown a predilection to prolixity, a sign that it is no longer fashionable to encompass a life in a single volume.⁴ This at a time when publishers tell us that we should keep our manuscripts under 100,000 words if we expect to sell our books!

Autobiography, like most other literary genres, has canons by which it is judged and we would do well to see how our politicians measure up. Critics tell us that autobiography became popular in the late 18th century when history replaced myth as the explanatory principle of human destiny. In the 20th century a worthy autobiography must include a) a coherent narrative, b) a heroic sense of achievement, c) reflection on events, and d) some attention to context. Autobiographical writing is less a historical exercise than it is a creative act of self-definition. Balance and accuracy are not as important as revelation and explanation. “Autobiography”, strictly defined, may be written for friends, for immortality, or to set the record straight, but ultimately it tends to focus on the author’s personal odyssey. In the “memoir” more emphasis is placed on public events and personalities.⁵ While these criteria are frequently violated and some-

1 H.G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography* (Toronto, 1934), p. 347.

2 Richard J. Cartwright, *Reminiscences* (Toronto, 1912); W. Stewart Wallace, ed., *The Memoirs of the Rt. Hon. Sir George Foster* (Toronto, 1933); Sir Charles Tupper, *Recollections of Sixty Years* (London, 1914).

3 *One Canada: Memoirs of the Right Honourable John G. Diefenbaker*, 3 vols. (Toronto, 1975-77); *Mike: The Memoirs of the Rt. Hon. Lester B. Pearson*, 3 vols. (Toronto, 1972-75); *Robert Laird Borden: His Memoirs* (Toronto, 1938); J.W. Pickersgill and D.F. Forster, eds., *The Mackenzie King Record*, 4 vols. (Toronto, 1960-70).

4 See, for instance, *Memoirs of Hugh L. Keenleyside*, 2 vols. (Toronto, 1981-2).

5 The literature on autobiography is almost as voluminous as the autobiographies under scrutiny. I have found the following useful: A.O.J. Cockshut, *The Art of Autobiography in 19th and 20th Century England* (New Haven, 1984); Thomas Cooley, *Educated Lives: The Rise of Auto-*

times justifiably questioned, they seem to be the underlying assumptions informing the three authors reviewed here, two of whom use the word “memoir” in their titles.

Taken together, Browne, Fleming and Martin have much in common. They shared modest origins, exceptional ambition and an education system that offered them upward mobility. All three went to the University of Toronto and after further study took up the practice of law. All three pursued youthful enthusiasms: Browne’s was Irish nationalism, Fleming’s municipal politics, and Martin’s was internationalism. They were strong Christians and good family men and each became a career politician, two actually running for the national leadership of their respective parties. Each in his own way failed to achieve his ultimate ambition, perhaps because in politics there is always another goal — a party leadership, a senatorship, an ambassadorial posting — to inspire continued stewardship. Even in taking their commendable decisions to write their life stories, they exhibit a sense of public ambition that men of their age might well have been forgiven for relinquishing.

Paul Martin is, on all counts, the most successful autobiographer. His two volumes *A Very Public Life: Vol. 1, Far From Home* (Ottawa, Deneau Publishers, 1983) and *Vol. 2, So Many Worlds* (Toronto, Deneau Publishers, 1985), take the reader logically through his long political career. Given the sometimes tedious subject matter, these volumes are a good read. Martin also has a suitably heroic sense of himself as battling difficult odds — humble origins that force him as a student to scrounge for financial assistance, a debilitating illness at the age of four, a recurring naiveté that lands him in embarrassing situations, a Franco-Ontarian background that makes him neither fish nor fowl in the rapidly changing political atmosphere of his times, and left-Liberal leanings that are blunted by a business-minded administration. He is sadly regarded as “old-guard” when the ultimate prize of party leadership was at last within his reach. There is not as much reflection in Martin’s volumes as one would like but there is enough. He writes careful assessments of his colleagues and of the four prime ministers under whom he served. He offers lucid, if somewhat long, explanations of his passionate interest in health care legislation, reformed labour law and foreign affairs. Martin’s account of his years as Secretary of State for External Affairs provides a useful perspective on Canada’s difficult relationship with the United States and other countries during the 1960s. His conviction that if he had it to do over again he would “do exactly the same” in sending J. Blair Seaborn

biography in America (Columbus, 1976); Jane Varner Gunn, *Autobiography: Toward A Poetics of Experience* (Philadelphia, 1982); Estelle C. Jelinek, ed., *Women’s Autobiography: Essays in Criticism* (Bloomington, 1980); James Olney, ed., *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton, 1980); Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (London, 1960); William C. Spengemann, *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven, 1980); Karl Joachim Weintraub, *The Value of the Individual: Self and Circumstance in Autobiography* (Chicago, 1978).

to Hanoi in 1964, if surprising, conforms with his general position on Canadian-United States relations. Martin speaks openly of his own ambition, of his resentment of King's contemptuous behaviour toward him and of his sibling rivalry with Lester Pearson, Douglas Abbott and Brooke Claxton. He is even prepared to reveal his own small-mindedness. When Diefenbaker won the leadership of the Progressive Conservative Party, Martin's response was to tell his colleague, "John, I just can't see you as prime minister". On such snubs are political egos honed. Martin has a good grasp of the context of his times and one suspects that the assistance of such academic historians as John English and Robert Bothwell accounts for the welcome lack of factual error in the general interpretation of events. Whether they saved Martin from himself in other ways depends on the reader's political perspective.

It is unfortunate that Donald Fleming did not have the friendship of two equally gifted historians dedicated to polishing his image and that of the party he served. It is not that Fleming's narrative *So Very Near: The Political Memoirs of the Honourable Donald Fleming: Vol. 1, The Rising Years; Vol. 2, The Summit Years* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1985) is riddled with errors. A few wrong dates, a party leader out of order, or a "Progressive" in front of Conservative before its time, are small matters in autobiographies. Rather, they would have tightened up the author's organization and tactfully pointed out the unfortunate image that many of his reflections convey. Nevertheless, it is precisely because Fleming "did it his way" that his memoirs capture a genuine sense of character and will be of singular value in helping historians to unravel the complexities of the Diefenbaker era. The "involuntary truths" that he offers about himself are immensely revealing. Even the compulsive and rigidly principled J.L. Ilsley, who figures prominently in Martin's narrative, could not compete with Fleming's fanatical earnestness and stubborn adherence to principle as he defined it. Indeed, Fleming must have been a very difficult colleague even for those who shared his principles. How, for instance, did Pierre Sévigny and William Browne respond to the smug Presbyterianism which still permits Fleming to write that "I have learned to look upon Roman Catholics with Christian love and growing understanding"? Did colleagues who had a strong commitment to public broadcasting find Fleming's unbending determination to destroy the "monopoly" of the CBC endearing? And how will readers of his memoirs assess a man who goes to great lengths to dissociate himself from his Bay Street image but then proceeds to cite its creed whenever the opportunity presents itself?

The points that Fleming loses on organization and reflection, then, he gains on his sense of heroic struggle. He notes that from an early age he reacted strongly to injustice and walked out of the classroom when a teacher threatened to punish him for something he did not do. He also found it difficult to apologize. It was ever thus. In university, he physically displayed the tunnel vision for which he later became famous by wearing green celluloid eye-shades "to elim-

inate all else but my book". Nothing daunted "Dare to be a Daniel Fleming", whether it be communists in the Toronto City Council or raiders of the national treasury. He boasts that he was never late for a cabinet meeting — all 826 of them, that he slept with his budget documents to prevent premature disclosure, and that he was able to keep up the hectic pace that he set for himself only because he had a devoted wife, a strong faith and a high sense of moral purpose. The tenacity with which he stood his ground in defiance of a difficult leader and a spend-thrift cabinet still vibrates in his prose. There is nothing, it seems, in his behaviour that he would change and, in case the reader has failed to get the message in the previous 109 chapters, he adds a chapter to the end of his book listing the 12 conclusions to which his political life has led him.

Fleming's memoirs tell us much about the man. Unfortunately, his personality tends to get in the way of his stated purpose, which is not to justify but to provide an accurate record of the events in which he played such a prominent role. Indeed, there is much useful material concerning the Diefenbaker administration in Fleming's book but it gets lost in the year-by-year accounting of events. Revealing tidbits such as the confrontation between Louis Rasminsky and Gordon Churchill during the reserve crisis of 1962, or the negotiations with the *Globe and Mail* early in 1963 over editorial policy, are mentioned but their implications are not drawn for the reader. Nor are the events with which Fleming was most closely associated as carefully analyzed as we might expect them to be by a man with Fleming's dedication to detail. We are told repeatedly that he wanted to avoid deficit budgets but we are never given a good explanation as to why, in the Keynesian atmosphere of the 1950s, he felt it desirable to do so. Given the economic climate of the times, is it sufficient to blame cabinet colleagues for the difficult financial situation which plagued the Diefenbaker government? What kind of soul-searching did Fleming experience in the three-way debate among his cabinet colleagues, the officials in Finance and the Governor of the Bank of Canada? He is right to say that budgets tend to follow a political rather than an economic cycle but, faced with a country fragmented on class, regional and cultural lines, how did he establish his priorities? It is the answers to these questions that readers of Fleming's autobiography might hope to find, but Fleming has not really distanced himself sufficiently from the events to put even himself in an altogether good light. Fleming wanted to portray himself as a dedicated, Christian steward, which in many ways he was, but most readers do not think in such terms and will come away from *So Very Near* with a less flattering image than the author hoped to convey.

Perhaps the answer to Fleming's dilemma can be found in the preface to William Browne's *Memoirs: Eighty-four Years A Newfoundlander, Memoirs of William J. Browne: Vol. 1: 1897-1949* (St. John's, Dicks and Company, 1981); *Eighty-seven Years a Newfoundlander: Memoirs of William J. Browne, Vol. 2, 1949-1965* (St. John's, Dicks and Company, 1984). Browne notes that politicians are not writers and that embarking on a writing career requires "time, in-

dustry, perseverance and single-mindedness, a combination which few men possess". Browne's volumes are more genuinely memoirs in the sense that they deal extensively with people other than himself and contain far more information about relatives and friends than can be found in the books by Martin and Fleming. In fact, Browne has the good sense to understand that public life is not the whole life. He notes with surprising candour that his wife often remarked on the lack of references to their children in his diary. Browne's narrative does not have the coherence of Martin's or the epic quality of Fleming's. Nor does he offer a more profound understanding of the political world in which he functioned. His strong point is his appreciation of the Newfoundland context and it is clearly for a Newfoundland audience that he is writing.

Browne's heroic credentials are well established in his discussion of his family's struggle for survival. Brown's mother ran a store, did piece-work on her sewing machine and sold real estate. His father, the quintessential jack-of-all-trades, constructed houses, sold fish, cut ice, built and sailed ships and worked in New York when employment in Newfoundland was scarce. Browne's married life was also full of heroic struggle. He buried two wives before he reached the age of 50. Like Fleming, Browne tightly clutches his principles, many based on his Roman Catholic upbringing. His discourse on divorce, the shorter work day and Joseph Smallwood, all of which he disapproves, and on cooperation, profit-sharing, and General MacArthur, all of which he approves, gives the reader a good measure of Browne's world-view. Browne's career in pre-Confederation politics, and his easy shifting back and forth between the provincial and federal arenas in the 1950s and 1960s, tell us much about the political culture of Newfoundland. Browne reveals that Smallwood deliberately manipulated the Confederation agreement to edge him out of his position as judge of the district court because Browne had championed the responsible government option in the referendum. Eight years later the wily premier encouraged Browne to run federally in order to have a Newfoundland representative in the Progressive Conservative camp when the McNair Commission on Term 29 of Confederation tabled its report. Unfortunately for Browne, he was unable to offer much assistance to his province, in part because Diefenbaker harboured as much resentment against Smallwood as did Browne himself. As is the case with Fleming, one wishes that Browne had digested his material more fully, or that he had stopped to reflect upon the meaning of the political turmoil that he chronicles. Nevertheless, it is useful to see the view from the Conservative perspective even if it is not the coherent panorama presented by a Paul Martin or a Joey Smallwood.

Autobiographies are often as important for what they leave out as for what they include. Readers of *Acadiensis* will not be surprised to learn that none of the authors spends much time on issues relating to Atlantic Canada. Even Browne fails to carry the discussion above the provincial and practically political. We do, however, occasionally catch a glimpse of the regional tensions that

percolated beneath the surface of the federal level. Martin cites a poem written by Cyrus MacMillan (MP for Queen's, Prince Edward Island, 1940-45) which was used to mock westerners when they raised the problems of wheat farmers in the House. Of course, humour is one of the most effective ways of trivializing an issue or a politician. To Martin's credit he is aware of the occupational differences that exacerbate regional tensions and he acknowledges their impact on federal politics. Fleming makes much of his "paternity" of the Atlantic Provinces Adjustment Grants but his enthusiasm for regional development is confirmed neither by the general tenour of his writing nor by the cabinet record. Yet errors of omission are not cited here as a criticism, for in autobiography it is the authors' perspective that is significant.

Together these politicians give Canadians a good picture of what concerned the generation of federal politicians who cut their political teeth in the interwar years and what they think is appropriate material for inclusion in their memoirs. They confirm the truism that politicians stop growing once they assume political office. Their early influences help explain both why they devoted their lives to public service and why they now feel it necessary to reveal the context of their lives. None of the books reviewed here will become a classic example of its genre, though Martin's is worthy of emulation. They will, however, be enjoyed by friends and colleagues and will be well thumbed by future generations of historians who want to know what made politicians in the 20th century tick.

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