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During the last few years a number of biographies of Canadian political figures have been published, Creighton's *John A. Macdonald*, Careless's *George Brown*, McNaught's *Woodsworth*, Dawson's and Pickersgill's accounts of *Mackenzie King*, Graham's *Meighen*, and now Dale Thomson's *Alexander Mackenzie*. The appearance of these books within the last few years is both interesting and valuable; interesting because it suggests a strong leaning on the part of English Canadian historians towards the history of Canada since Confederation rather than prior to 1867; valuable because it provides a generation of Canadian students dominated by the figure of Mackenzie King with a sense of perspective and historical balance. The builders of Confederate Canada emerge into flesh and blood as the man who cast so large a shadow over more recent times dissolves into an unsubstantial ghost.

Mackenzie was chosen as the subject of his first biography by Dale Thomson probably because Mr. Thomson, as a former secretary to Mr. Louis St. Laurent, was a Liberal in politics. It was not unnatural that he should be attracted to the first Liberal prime minister of Canada after Confederation. Perhaps he was

attracted to Mackenzie out of sheer curiosity; for there could have been no man who, at first glance, seems to have been less fitted for the leadership of a nation than the Scottish-born stone mason who arrived in Canada in 1842 with sixteen shillings in his pocket and copies of the Bible and Burns's poem under his arm. Mackenzie's formal education ceased when he was no more than thirteen years of age. Years later, when he was Prime Minister, he took part in the opening of the Royal Military College in Kingston. He was big enough to recall that thirty years earlier he had been employed as a stone mason on the fortification which still stands on Point Frederick on the college grounds, recalling the days when Canada was threatened with a war over a far away boundary in Oregon.

If the Horatio Alger-like quality of Mackenzie's career has its attractions for the author, so too does the fact of Mackenzie's success intrigue the student of Canadian politics in view of the nature of Mackenzie's personality. In many ways Mackenzie was the embodiment of the Calvinist ethic. He was Canada's great puritan. Work was the principal virtue; there could be no room in his life for idling, for idleness was a misuse of the talents given by God to every man. Hard physical labour combined with rigid personal integrity were the lights which showed Mackenzie the way of life. And in the end they would bring their rewards from God.

There could have been no greater contrast between the two Scotsmen who governed Canada during the latter part of the nineteenth century than that between Alexander Mackenzie and John Macdonald; the one dour, the other debonair; the one rugged, the other polished; the one strictly honest, the other with a more elastic sense of values; the one opposed to the use of alcoholic beverages, the other too frequently their victim. But the greatest contrast of all was the political failure of the first, and the extraordinary success of the latter. Canadians apparently preferred affability to integrity.

Mr. Thomson has written about his subject with friendliness and appreciation. He did not set out to poke fun at the stone-faced man whom George Brown called 'the noblest workingman in the land'. He did not choose to expose Mackenzie to the jibes of those who laugh at his virtues. He writes with sympathy and with understanding. And he does it after having had recourse to the primary sources which he list in his preface. And he has produced a book, better by far than the stodgy and partisan biography written in 1892 by William Buckingham and George Ross. And yet, to this reviewer at least, Mr. Thomson

has not wholly succeeded in giving his readers a living man. There is much in the book about Mackenzie the political leader; there is too little about Mackenzie the man. It would be well to know more about his personal relationships with his friends, more about what he thought and did when away from the demands of politics. Mr. Thomson has given us a few glimpses of his great friendship with George Brown; but he does no more than suggest friendly relations between Mackenzie and Dorion. It is quite possible that the material for such personal history is not available in the Mackenzie Papers. Perhaps they do not reveal his innermost thoughts and feelings. It would have been out of character for the man he was and the race from which he sprang for Mackenzie to written letters of an intimate personal nature, or for him to have kept a personal diary. After all he could not let himself go like Macdonald, nor did he possess the almost pathological egoism which drove Mackenzie King to commit so much of himself to paper. But whatever the explanation may be, Mackenzie still remains to the readers of this book, a remote and cold man, perhaps because that is just what he was. Had he been able to combine integrity with warm-heartedness, and virtue with the art of manipulating men, he would have held the post of Prime Minister of Canada longer than five years.

One of the usual features of Canadian political success has been the close co-operation of French and English-speaking leaders. When one thinks of Macdonald, the name of Cartier comes to mind; almost automatically the names of Laurier, King, and St. Laurent, conjure up those of Cartwright, Lapointe and Howe. But Mackenzie's name evokes that of no French Canadian counterpart. Antoine Dorion who served as Mackenzie's Minister of Justice retired too soon to the bench, and Félix Geoffrion possessed neither the stature nor the confidence of Mackenzie to leader liberalism to success in Quebec.

One aspect of Mackenzie's career which still remains something of an enigma, even after a reading of Mr. Thomson's biography, is the narrowness of his mind with respect to Louis Riel and the métis of Manitoba, and the breadth of his vision as far as political reform, responsible government and the growing sense of Canadian national identity are concerned. It seems hard to believe that the man who supported Blake's offer of a financial reward for the arrest of the métis leader, who charged Riel with rebellion against British authority, and who condemned the Manitoba Act, was the same man whose government established the Supreme Court of Canada and the Royal Military College of

Canada in an effort to relieve Canadians of their dependence upon Great Britain. Essentially a liberal and a humanitarian, he could not overcome his prejudices sufficiently to embrace the little group of people who were demanding no more than he would have been willing to concede had they been Scots and Protestants. Nevertheless this contradiction tended to disappear as time mellowed his attitudes. Towards the latter part of his political career he appears as the defender of French Canadians against the hostile majorities of Ontario, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. This evolution in Mackenzie is brought out in his biography. It is not adequately explained.

All in all Mr. Thomson's book on Alexander Mackenzie is an important and a significant contribution to Canadian historical writing. If it is not exactly lively or entertaining, it is convincing and enlightening. And it fills a notable gap in our historiography with a work of scholarship of which the author can be proud.

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