

## *Memoirs and Reflections by Roy McMurtry*

Ryan Alford

---

Volume 108, numéro 2, fall 2016

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1050597ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050597ar>

[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

Alford, R. (2016). Compte rendu de [*Memoirs and Reflections by Roy McMurtry*]. *Ontario History*, 108(2), 255–257. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050597ar>

# B ook Reviews

AUTUMN 2016

## *Memoirs and Reflections*

by Roy McMurtry

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013, 640 pp. 48 images. Cased.  
\$45. ISBN 978-1-4426-4830-2. ([www.utppublishing.com](http://www.utppublishing.com))

*Memoirs and Reflections* has been widely praised as an enlightening and enjoyable introduction to the life and times Roy McMurtry, who served as Attorney-General and Chief Justice of Ontario (among numerous other positions, including Chief Executive Officer of the Canadian Football League). This critical consensus is well-founded, but there is more.

The book differs from many recent insider accounts of turbulent times; these differences yield significant insight into Canada's political culture past and present. McMurtry,

perhaps Ontario's foremost legal and political eminence during the latter half of the twentieth century, can be excused for not dwelling on the details of some of the key moments in recent history that he witnessed. His role in John Diefenbaker's removal and his presence at the creation of Bill Davis' "Big Blue Machine" are described in broad strokes (and centre on vignettes), but this is understandable as some of the participants (including McMurtry) are still active in public life.

McMurtry's *ethos* is the key to the memoir. The story of his life unfolds across a series of tests



MEMOIRS  
AND REFLECTIONS  
ROY McMURTRY

of character, in the telling of which the author's humanitarian sensibilities become evident. His reflections reveal the importance of compassion to his vision of politics—and, more importantly, to his case for a humane political culture. The *Memoirs'* structure fosters this objective: the four middle sections of the volume (discussing McMurtry's time in private legal practice, as the Attorney-General, as the High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, and as Chief Justice) are bracketed by two more multifaceted sections.

The first part of the *Memoirs* ("Getting Established") tells the story of McMurtry's formation. Curiously, it begins not with his childhood, but rather with the political biography of his great-great grandfather, an Ulster Scot who emigrated to Canada and joined the struggle for responsible government. The author is no Tristram Shandy: this history clearly informed the author's own political ideology, which valorizes patriotism, public service, and cooperation.

These values are the recurring themes of the *Memoirs*. McMurtry is generous to those with whom he disagreed, almost to a fault. This is in keeping with his conduct during various crises, which demonstrate prudence, even-handedness, and faith in the reason and good nature of his opponents. While the author appears to dwell on the events that tended to generate criticism at the time, he rarely claims to have been vindicated by history—although he does point out that the findings of his 1974 report on violence in hockey were vindicated by recent research on sports concussions.

The final section of the book ("Reflections on My Life") allows the author to address his themes more explicitly; in doing so, he shifts to an elegiac mode. McMurtry's sorrow upon witnessing the intense lack of compassion, obvious political partisan-

ship and politicians intent on demonizing people is related to the Harper and Harris governments' rejection of McMurtry's core values. While he is sanguine about the future of the legal profession, he is perplexed by popular disengagement from politics. In particular, McMurtry expresses concern that young people are becoming "cynical about the ability of the political system to resolve or even ameliorate our social challenges" (531).

This problem reveals retrospectively that the *Memoirs* is also a chronicle of social transformation. McMurtry's *apologia* promotes compassion, respect, and humane values, but this is undercut by his recognition of the fact that these are now ever more infrequent and perhaps impractical in public life. The book does not attempt to resolve this impasse, but his work provides insight into the social changes that have hindered his political aims. The tacit sense of *noblesse oblige* that motivated the author's public service was enabled by institutions that no longer exist: it is difficult to imagine a new analogue to Frontier College's Labour-Teacher program, in which a young McMurtry and his colleagues, armed with what the program's founder described as "clean life and ideals" (42), could demonstrate to his fellows that "these are not beaten men of a beaten race" (40).

Perhaps regrettably, the twentieth-century notion of "giving back" now has a complicated relationship with the twenty-first century concept of "privilege". It may not be possible for McMurtry to resolve this tension, but it is increasingly unavoidable. While the author is generally frank about the advantages conferred by his family's social standing, he does not acknowledge that social mobility can be a zero-sum game. Accordingly, while he notes that the Dean of Osgoode Hall Law School admitted him midway through term, he does not

dwell on the fact that this might have been connected to his father's legal career and political connections, or on the fact that a student with a different ethnic or socioeconomic background might not have received similar consideration.

Interestingly, McMurtry speaks positively of Bora Laskin (who entered the legal profession a generation earlier); he does not mention that Laskin's legal career was triumph against adversity, primarily in the form of anti-Semitism, despite the fact that McMurtry's father was a determined opponent of anti-Semitism and racism. The author's focus on the ills of discrimination—rather than the issue of privilege—might be disconcerting to the young people he hopes will re-engage with his political tradition. This is unfortunate, as the first section's treatment of his family history might have provided a natural segue to this issue, insofar as a discussion of his ancestors' participation in British colonialism in Ireland and the translation of the elevated social status they achieved there to Upper

Canada might have been fruitful.

McMurtry's sorrow about the state of politics and the absence of new conceptual framework for selfless idealism ultimately casts a melancholy shadow over his memoir, one vaguely reminiscent of Stefan Zweig's *The World of Yesterday*. This does not diminish the *Memoirs*. Rather, it adds another dimension to a set of remarkable first-hand impressions of critical moments in Canadian history (including the patriation of the Constitution), and a perspective on the idealism that made numerous achievements possible. To this, it contributes a recognition that to be human—or even as remarkable a person as the author—is to be limited, such that what is best in us is ultimately fleeting. This impression gives his reflections a classical aspect, one appropriate to the deeply felt humanism that animated McMurtry's efforts.

Ryan Alford, Assistant Professor  
Bora Laskin Faculty of Law  
Lakehead University

## *Family Ties*

### *Living History in Canadian House Museums*

by Andrea Terry

Montreal, Kingston, London, Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015. 248 pages. \$44.95 paperback ISBN 978-0-7735-4562-5. ([www.mqup.ca](http://www.mqup.ca))

House museums are about more than doilies and table settings. In her latest work, *Family Ties: Living History in Canadian House Museums*, Andrea Terry demonstrates that the re-creations of domestic space in historic houses, although often purported to be de-politicized because of their personal nature, are in fact very politically motivated reconstructions. This book

exposes the artifice of three historic houses by way of their exhibits and their Victorian Christmas celebrations: McNab's Dundurn Castle in Hamilton, Ontario, the Sir George-Etienne Cartier National Historic Site of Canada in Montreal, Quebec, and the William Lyon Mackenzie House in Toronto, Ontario. Terry deconstructs Canadian house museums (one federally and