"Character and Circumstance": Political Biography in the 1990s

POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY was once thought of as almost synonymous with Canada's political history. This history has sometimes been interpreted as the interplay of empires or explained by economic determinism, but more often it was assumed that the country was largely the result of political decisions. To understand our past, we looked to the lives and decisions of politicians. In the balance between character and circumstance, we gave character a predominant role. But much has changed in the last generation. Political history has almost been crowded off Clio's podium by the emphasis on social and regional patterns and by studies of class and gender. How has political biography been affected by these changes?

One thing is obvious from the list of biographies under review. Scholars in history may be writing specialized articles and monographs to be read by other scholars, but professional historians also continue to write political biographies. It is also apparent that these biographies have not been written with only other specialists as the audience. They are written in a prose which is meant to be accessible to a non-academic audience. At the same time, they are not potboilers, aimed at a mass audience. For the authors, political biography is still one approach to an understanding of our past.

But how have the changes in the discipline of history affected biographical writing? Has political biography become a sub-category of social or regional or class history, providing case studies within these specialized fields? Or has political biography incorporated the new insights of other specialists to achieve a more sophisticated view of the role of the individual? If these volumes are a representative sample, the pattern is far from clear. They have been influenced in various degrees by the new approaches to the past but neither the form nor the content of political biography has been radically affected.

One thing is clear. There is no trend towards psychobiography. Carl Berger, writing about the political biographies of the 1950s and 1960s, noted that "none of these books was directly informed — or marred — by any explicit application of psychological theories, Freudian or otherwise".[1] Some 30 years later not much has changed. The authors of the books under review are clearly aware that childhood experiences shape personality but they shy away from using psychoanalysis to explain political decisions; they tend to present evidence which seems relevant but leave the theorizing to the reader.

Contemporary literary biographers seem much more sensitive to the lifetime legacy of childhood traumas. Peter Ackroyd, for example, constantly refers back to Charles Dickens' relations with his parents or to his experience in the blacking

1 Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History* (Toronto, 1976), p. 221.

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factory to account for his behaviour as an adult and for the treatment of themes and of personalities in his novels.[2] Political biographers are much more circumspect. Why are political biographers so much more reticent? It is true that in many cases the evidence for the formative years is sketchy and unreliable, but this could also be said for most literary figures, and in some cases the information the political biographers have unearthed almost cries out for Freud. The explanation may be that literature is more a product of the author's imagination whereas politics may require imagination, but it is also shaped by external factors. Whatever the reason, when political biographers try to explain the behaviour of their subjects, they rely more on the influence of depressions and wars than on toilet training.

There are differences in degree. James H. Gray tells us in the first two pages of *R.B. Bennett: The Calgary Years* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1991) that Bennett learned the virtues of industry, sobriety and thrift at his mother's knee and leaves it at that. Roger Graham, in *Old Man Ontario: Leslie M. Frost* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press for the Ontario Historical Studies Series, 1990) does note the extraordinary sibling relationship between Leslie Frost and his younger brother Cecil; the two men saw service in France and were seriously wounded, studied law together, became law partners and brothers-in-law, and were both active in provincial politics. But Graham does not speculate on how this shaped Leslie. When Cecil died suddenly at the age of 50, Graham describes it as a "devastating blow" but his Leslie seems unchanged and really unaffected, and Cecil is never mentioned again. Robin Fisher, author of *Duff Pattullo of British Columbia* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1991) does speculate that Pattullo's recklessness may be linked to his mother's early death but this is almost an aside. John T. Saywell, in *'Just Call Me Mitch': The Life of Mitchell F. Hepburn* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press for the Ontario Historical Studies Series, 1991) goes farther; he recounts the political scandal involving Will Hepburn, the father, because it is clearly relevant to Mitch's youthful flouting of conventions and probably not unrelated to his fondness for liquor and women and his friendship with men of similar tastes. But when it comes to the stuff of politics, whether it is tariffs or patronage or when to call an election, the authors all look to the political pressures of the day and pay little attention to psychological factors.

Nor has intellectual history left much of an imprint on these biographies. Gray's Bennett gets his values from his Methodist upbringing but these values are assumed to have been unchanged since the days of John Wesley. At one time Fisher finds the roots of Pattullo's liberalism in Mowat's Ontario but later he attributes it to western boosterism, without discussing whether the two perspectives are congruent, or in what way Pattullo's experience in the Yukon may have modified his Grit heritage. Saywell's Hepburn was a partisan Grit and Graham's Frost inherited his Conservatism, but neither biographer spends much time analyzing these political traditions or how their subjects may have adapted them.

2 Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (London, 1990).

John English, author of *Shadow of Heaven: The Life of Lester Pearson, Vol. I: 1897-1948* (Toronto, Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1989) is an exception. English sees Pearson's intellectual development as central to his diplomatic career. He sees links between the Anglo-conformity and the middle-class Methodism of late 19th century Southern Ontario and Pearson's later commitment to liberal democracy, social egalitarianism and to an internationalism based on the political resolution of conflicts. English also stresses the importance of Pearson's experiences during the First World War, in which he saw unheroic tragedies in a Salonika hospital and had a brief career in the Flying Corps which was far short of glorious. When war was no longer romantic, the half-loaf of a negotiated settlement was a positive good.

Allen Mills' *Fool for Christ: The Political Thought of J.S. Woodsworth* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1991) is in a separate category because it is an intellectual biography. Mills has taken Woodsworth's intellectual development seriously and has provided a meticulous study of the shifts and changes in his political ideas. He argues, for example, that Woodsworth's nativism in his early years was not racist because it stressed cultural rather than biological factors although, according to Mills, it was discriminatory because it assumed a hierarchy of cultures with the Anglo-Saxons being the closest to God. Mills then shows that Woodsworth's goal of social integration and his increasing misgivings about British imperialism gradually tempered his cultural bias. Mills is better at describing Woodsworth's evolving political ideas than in accounting for them, but his study does throw new light on this unusual man. His Woodsworth still has a strong moral commitment, but he is more influenced by scientific ideas and by intellectual analysis than earlier biographers have suggested. Mills does not claim that Woodsworth was an original thinker, but he does show the significance of political ideas even when the subject is not an intellectual.

What of women's history? Do women's issues get more attention in recent biographies of male politicians? The subjects of these studies were too young to be involved in the feminist debates before the First World War, but they were politicians at a time when half the people on the voters' list were women. Surely that had some importance when they had to deal with issues such as prohibition in which women were supposed to have a special interest? And what importance did they give to the women's section of the party or to women's associations that submitted petitions on the League of Nations or some other issue? If we are to judge by these volumes, the male politicians paid no attention to women as a political force and no attention to the opinions of women. Or is this the fault of male biographers who never noticed? Whatever the explanation, the impression is that women were still a separate sphere, and that sphere did not encroach on politics.

Terry Crowley's study *Agnes Macphail and the Politics of Equality* (Toronto, James Lorimer and Company, 1990) is a notable exception. Macphail was certainly a political phenomenon, as the first and for 15 years the only female Member of Parliament, representing a rural riding where women traditionally played a supporting role. Crowley sees Macphail as a bridge between the maternal feminism

of the early 20th century and the second wave of feminism of the post-war era. Her interest in penal reform and international peace can be seen as expressions of maternal feminism just as her commitment to equality can be linked to later feminism. Crowley's biography, however, often seems to shift from one topic to the next without a clear narrative thread. This at least suggests that advancing the cause of women has its limitations as the key to Macphail's motivation.

Mills' study of Woodsworth is also an exception. Mills notes that Woodsworth was concerned with the status of women. In 1911 he wanted to protect women from the risks of the workplace and the saloon and saw the home as their proper place. By 1919 his views on economic justice had evolved and he was arguing for equal pay for women in the labour force and state subsidies for those at home raising children. It was not practical politics, but at least Woodsworth had recognized that there was a problem.

If politicians' views about women are largely ignored, is there anything to be learned from their relations with their wives? Gertrude Frost is pictured as the supportive wife, baking cookies for post-election rallies in Lindsay and is often at Leslie's side on political campaigns. Whatever her political opinions may have been, her husband seems to have treated them with amused tolerance. Eva Hepburn is described as the dutiful wife, with no political opinions worth mentioning, often staying on the farm during the session, and ready to forgive Hepburn's adultery. Lillian Pattullo was the long-suffering wife, uninterested in politics and whose arthritis exempted her from travel and entertaining. In each case, however, the wife is largely relegated to her husband's private life and is assumed to have no influence on policy or strategy. Politics is a man's world.

John English does not quite fit this pattern. He devotes a complete chapter to Maryon Pearson as a young woman, showing her youthful idealism and her belief that marriage would be a partnership in which she would be more than a housekeeper and homemaker. But Maryon's role in her husband's career still seems peripheral. In the early years she is shown as involved in the social life in London which was part of diplomacy in the inter-war years, and she, along with the wives of other officers, was part of the close-knit community of the Department of External Affairs in Ottawa, but with the war she too fades into the background. Was she informed and did she comment on the issues with which her husband's work was involved? English sees her as more and more isolated from Pearson's work and sees this as an explanation for the image of Maryon in later life as a sharp-tongued cynic.

The influence of wives on their husbands, politicians or otherwise, is never easy to establish. The biographers were obviously interested in the question and have done their research thoroughly so we can safely assume that if there had been more evidence of wifely influence they would have reported it. Nonetheless it is intriguing that 19th-century wives such as Agnes Macdonald and Annie Thompson, even before women had the vote, seem to have been more directly involved in their husband's political decisions. Had politicians' wives become less political?

The interest in regional history might be expected to have more influence on political biographies. Indeed, of the books under review, the biographies of Hepburn and Frost were specifically sponsored as part of a series designed to show that Ontario is a region. Saywell and Graham, however, are not regional historians. They are sensitive to the political interplay between the "sub-regions" of the province, but there is no emphasis on Ontario as a region with a cultural or economic identity which distinguishes it from other regions in Canada. Nor is there any claim that Ontario has a distinctive political culture. To them, the province is a geographical territory. Hepburn and Frost do represent the interests of Ontario at federal-provincial conferences, but these interests are not interpreted in regional terms. When Hepburn crosses swords with William Lyon Mackenzie King or Frost negotiates with Louis St. Laurent, the personal factor is given more importance than any regional imperative.

Fisher's biography of Pattullo is more consciously a regional study. His Pattullo is a man from the interior, marked by his time in the Yukon and Prince Rupert, who believes that the role of government is to build the transportation system to promote economic growth. It was a perspective strongly enough held by many British Columbians to justify the claim that British Columbia was a political region as well as a province. The interior communities, however, resented the imperialist aspirations of the lower mainland, and it is no coincidence that the local boosterism of Pattullo and his party produced few Liberal seats in Vancouver. Fisher may exaggerate the homogeneity of British Columbia as a region when he pictures Pattullo as a regional champion, but at least Pattullo would have agreed.

Fisher's analysis, however, suggests that regionalism is still an awkward tool for many historians. The class divisions in British Columbia were accentuated by the Depression and crystallized to such an extent that provincial politics since the 1930s has been dominated by the ideological division between left and right. It could almost be called characteristic of the region. Duff Pattullo, however, could not come to terms with the pattern and eventually he was pushed aside by his own party so that the Liberals and Conservatives could form a coalition against the CCF. Not only is regional unity a matter of degree, but regions evolve and an emphasis on a politician as a regional spokesman may require an oversimplification.

And what of Maritime regionalism? *Acadiensis* has done more than any other journal to show that a regional approach, at least for the Maritimes, can enrich our historical understanding. These volumes, however, suggest that there is still work to be done. These politicians and, one suspects, the authors as well, have not been paying much attention. In these books the regions — or provinces — east of Quebec scarcely exist.

Which brings us to political history. The limitations of biography as political history are still evident. Writing about events from the point of view of one participant may make it difficult to put developments in a broader context but, on the other hand, if too much space is devoted to the political background the reader may lose sight of the subject of the biography. This is especially true when the politician is not in office and so is not participating directly in the discussions about

government policy. Macphail and Woodsworth can advocate measures or comment on policies, but they are on the periphery. Even Pearson before 1948 is an agent rather than a principal, and it is not surprising that English is often more interested in the effect of negotiations on Pearson's reputation as a diplomat than on the substance of the negotiations. Readers who want to learn about the issues involved in wheat negotiations before the war or post-war international agreements will have to go elsewhere.

These biographies nonetheless deserve an important place on the shelves reserved for political history. They provide information and perspectives which will revise our interpretations of past politics. Saywell's biography is the best example. His Hepburn is something more than the man on the make co-opted by George McCullagh and the northern mining magnates or the demagogue riding the anti-communist ticket back into office. Saywell sees in Hepburn a genuine sympathy for the less privileged combined with a pre-Keynesian reliance on private enterprise to create jobs. The influence of his wealthy cronies is conceded but the northern mines could provide jobs. Saywell also argues that there were active communists with a revolutionary agenda in Ontario and that Hepburn had reason to be concerned. If there is a villain in the book it is Arthur Roebuck, who encouraged the radicals to demand concessions. Roebuck also bears much of the responsibility for the fiasco over the Ontario Hydro contracts, when he deceived even his own colleagues on the question of the hydro reserves. In the feud with King there is no hero and no villain; Saywell balances Hepburn's impetuosity against King's paranoia. Saywell has described Hepburn with all his warts, but his version of the Oshawa strike and Ottawa Hydro is convincing, and even experts will learn a great deal from his account of provincial politics and the provincial Liberal Party between the wars. Specialists in political history will also be grateful for the extensive footnotes in which the author discusses the information contained in a wide variety of primary and secondary sources and debates the interpretations of other scholars.

The two studies of R.B. Bennett are different in approach and objective. James Gray has done more than most academic historians to interest Canadians in their past, but his book on Bennett is not a well-integrated study. There is much on Bennett's legal and financial activities in Calgary but there is very little about Bennett on the broader political stage. No biographer of Bennett can ignore his business interests but we cannot understand the man if we do not understand his political ambitions. If Peter Waite is going to write a sequel on the years after 1930 he will need a long introductory section to tell us more about the earlier Bennett.[3]

3 P.B. Waite's *The Loner: Three Sketches of the Personal Life and Ideas of R.B. Bennett, 1870-1947* (Toronto, 1992) appeared too late to discuss in this review. It is not a biography, but Waite, like John English, looks to family life and friendships to understand the politician. If Waite and English represent a trend, Canadian political biography in the 1990s will tell us more about the person than the politics. Specialists in political history will not be pleased, but I think such biographies would win back a wider audience.

Larry Glassford's *Reaction and Reform: The Politics of the Conservative Party under R.B. Bennett, 1927-1938* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1992) is not, strictly speaking, a political biography. It is a study of the fortunes and misfortunes of the Conservative Party under R.B. Bennett. It is, however, an example of the thorough and wide-ranging research characteristic of most of the biographies under review, and also of the concern to make scholarship available to literate readers. For example, the chapter on the 1927 convention which chose Bennett as leader is based on the verbatim report of the convention, newspaper accounts and the private papers of many of the participants as well as books, articles and theses. And Glassford has used this material to tell a dramatic story, complete with character sketches of the contestants and of their ambitions and their rivalries. Character and circumstance are combined to make the political process fascinating.

If these books form a representative sample, it is clear that there has been no revolution in political biography over the last generation. The biographers are not unaware of the work going on in specialized fields, including psychology, intellectual history, women's history and regional history, but their biographies have certainly not become sub-categories of these genres. In comparison with earlier biographies the research ranges more widely and the political analysis is more sophisticated. But the emphasis is still on the politics and not on the politician as an individual. Political biography is still seen as an approach to the understanding of our political history. Even the basic assumptions about both character and circumstance have not greatly changed.

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