

Recent Publications and Documents

THE IMPERIAL CANADIAN: VINCENT MASSEY IN OFFICE, Claude Bissell, University of Toronto Press, 1986, p. 361;
HER EXCELLENCY JEANNE SAUVÉ, Shirley E. Woods, MacMillan, Toronto, 1986, p. 242.

Biographies of two Canadian Governor Generals, Vincent Massey and Jeanne Sauvé, have appeared recently. The former, by Claude Bissell, is more scholarly and authoritative; the latter, by Shirley Wood, more journalistic and ephemeral. Both are agreeable to read – Bissell's even attaining a certain elegance – and both are, above all, respectful of their subject. There are no revelations here about the character of either; nor are there any insights to be gained into their entourage, the times they lived in or the office they occupied. The only exception, at least for this reader, was Wood's chapter on Maurice Sauvé in which one realizes to what extent he was an isolated transitional figure: at home neither with the old style St.-Laurent Liberals, nor with Trudeau's new guard. Yet in many ways he was an indispensable figure who provided a link between one of the major social movements contributing to the Quiet Revolution and the federal government in Ottawa.

To return to Bissell's biography, the more important of the two, there is something frustrating about a book that is so well written yet which sheds so little light. The succession of leading roles which Massey was called on to play – as High Commissioner in London, patron of the arts, Chancellor of the University of Toronto, Chairman of a Royal Commission on the Arts, and Governor General – are all delineated with great skill. A sound organization of material (papers, diaries, official minutes of meetings) has been fleshed out by the sensibility of an artist and a gentleman. Yet the book never comes alive. After putting it down we have no idea of what the world must have been like to Vincent Massey. What motivated him? He occupied the highest offices in Canada, he was familiar with the highest strata of British society, but one gets the impression that he may have been a disappointed man during the latter half

of his life. A political career, or more precisely a ministerial career in which he could directly shape the cause of public affairs, eluded him. Continuously thwarted by Mackenzie King his high appointments appear to be so many consolation prizes. In any event this relationship with King should have been explored more fully: in so doing he may have provided us with a glimpse of the personal as distinct from the official being that was Massey. Nor is any light shed on the social and political significance of Vincent Massey's career. Why is it that everything he stood for – support of the arts, our ties with Britain, the theatricality of public life, the need for social distinctions – while being granted lip service, was eventually

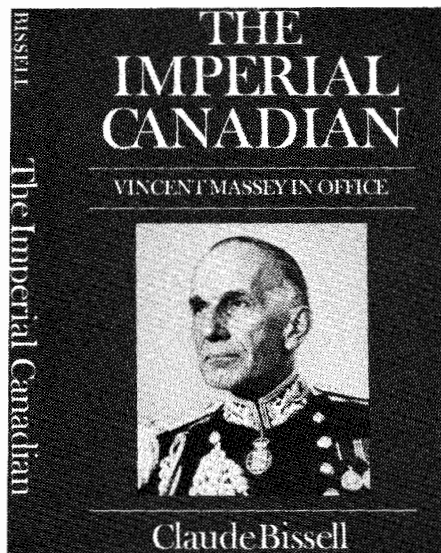
clues to which are nowhere to be found in the *Imperial Canadian*.

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WHELAN: THE MAN IN THE GREEN STETSON, Eugene Whelan and Rick Archbold, Toronto, Irwin Publishing, 1986, 322p; and **THE RAINMAKER: A PASSION FOR POLITICS**, Senator Keith Davey, Toronto, Stoddart, 1986, 383p.

American humourist Kin Hubbard once said that "if there's any literary ability in a feller, gettin' bounced out of a good government job'll bring it out faster'n anything." Since the Liberal defeat of 1984, Canadian bookstore shelves have borne out the truth of this remark. Three members of the Trudeau Cabinet have rushed into print, along with a former member of the PMO and an old backroom boy. Their books sold well or badly depending on the public profile of the author or the apparent relevance of their content to the political dramas of the moment. Regrettably, the stampede to read Senator Keith Davey's indictment of John Turner led many people to overlook the most readable and satisfying book of the whole crop: *Whelan: The Man in the Green Stetson*. This engaging portrait of a political maverick does much to justify Whelan's complaints that he is constantly underestimated. This, of course, is the theme of every political memoir ever written, but *Whelan* is an education in the limits of slick image-makers with their patronizing attitude toward "little people", notably farmers. Whelan is a clever man and a canny politician, and a good storyteller besides.

Whelan begins in rural Ontario with an absorbing account of a large family struggling through the Depression. The first few chapters, which take



eclipsed by what Bruce Hutchinson has called Mackenzie King's "triumph of mediocrity". Why did his vision of Canada, which was a cultural, contemporary extension of the Fathers of Confederation's vision, not carry the day? Why were some of the generation of Canadians who came into their prime during the inter-war years, like Massey, so at home in Britain and so uneasy in the United States, while others of the same generation and similar backgrounds feel just the reverse? These are the larger questions,

Whelan from school to his first public office, his marriage and his entry into Liberal politics, are funny and gracefully written (the latter due in some measure to co-author Rick Archbold). Chapters Four through Seven describe Whelan's years as a backbencher under Pearson. The pages are studded with generous tributes to political luminaries, but there are also shrewd assessments of personal failings. In these chapters the book's major flaw appears: a tendency to self-congratulation which mars the account of Whelan's battles in Ottawa. He is far from the worst offender among the political memoirists – and why write an autobiography if not to indulge in a little crowing or perfect hindsight? But watching an author pat his own back is a distasteful experience. Happily, the book usually overcomes this flaw and retains its interest and charm.

The chapters covering Whelan's years under Trudeau, first as parliamentary secretary and then as Minister of Agriculture, provide an unexpected bonus: an often excellent account of how a Cabinet Minister does his or her job – in the department, in caucus, in Cabinet and committees, and on the road. This kind of material is rare in Canada, where too little is known about the daily operations of government. *Whelan* is an invaluable addition to the academic speculations about the executive at work.

These middle chapters contain many entertaining digressions. One of these is an account of the Cabinet's failure to bail out Quebec dairy farmers in the spring of 1976, an episode which, according to Whelan, gave the Parti Québécois the rural votes it needed for its first majority. (So much for the tons of paper consumed by the academic debate on political ideologies in Quebec!). The tone of the writing starts to sour during the chapter on Trudeau's last decade in power, and the following chapter on Whelan's foreign travels is a welcome relief. He is not afraid to applaud Castro's Cuba, Ariel Sharon's initiatives as Israeli Agriculture Minister, or Princess Anne's earthier remarks. The section about his drinking contests behind the Iron Curtain is wonderful, and the pages about Mikhail Gorbachev revealing and poignant. The story about Gorbachev's meeting with Peter Lougheed is worth the price of the book.

Although *Whelan* has received far less than its share of attention, the final chapter did raise a few media ripples. It concerns Whelan's quixotic run for the Liberal leadership, his firing by John Turner, and his shabby treatment by the new Conservative government. The

book makes clear that there was never any love lost between Whelan and Turner, although the bitterness of the early Turner anecdotes may be partly due to recent events. However, the reasons for Whelan's removal from Turner's Cabinet remain vague. Whelan accuses Turner's aides of convincing the leader that "Big Gene" was a political liability, but doesn't explain. Perhaps Whelan's misquoted remark about Africans not wearing hats, widely interpreted as racist, hurt him more than he likes to admit. Or it may have been his support for Chrétien at the leadership convention. Whatever the reason, Whelan, like practically everyone else concerned, claims to have counselled Turner against an early election call. (If all of these people really did have this much foresight, Turner's judgment must be seriously doubted). The book ends with a plea for a more small-"l" Liberal Party and a veiled incitement to Liberal delegates to vote for a leadership review and bring the party back to the left of centre. These few paragraphs are much gentler, hence less newsworthy, than Davey's frontal assault on Turner, and reflect much better on the author's character and discretion.

Whelan leaves a lasting impression of a shrewd, earthy populist trying to manoeuvre around over educated, out-of-touch bureaucrats and lawyer-politicians. The real hero of the book is Whelan's wife Liz. His praise of her support, hard work and courage is frequent and generous, but barely enough for a quarter-century as a politician's wife – a role yet to be adequately studied or appreciated.

There are many contrasts between *Whelan* and another Liberal memoir, Senator Keith Davey's *The Rainmaker: A Passion for Politics*. Senator Davey's book failed to incite a revolt against John Turner in November 1986, so the topical interest which stimulated its early sales is no more. The book must now be judged solely on its merits, which are meager compared to *Whelan*. There is no absorbing account of a nascent politician; oddly enough, Christina McCall-Newman gave a much better portrait of the young Davey in *Grits* than Davey himself can muster. From the very first page, the tone of *The Rainmaker* wobbles uneasily between self-promotion, false humility and stabs at profundity. The writing has none of the charm of *Whelan*, the content is surprisingly dull, and the observations on Liberal ideology often muddled.

In the midst of this, three things stand out. One is the large quantity of space devoted to pictures, most of Davey, the rest inscribed to Davey by

various political notables. Another is the tendency to insert long lists of "maxims", "commandments" and "ground rules", not to mention the names of Davey's favourite political commentators and lengthy quotations from Davey's own report on the media. This is both annoying and strangely pretentious for a man who claims nothing but scorn for pompous intellectuals. Finally, there is a surprisingly good chapter in defence of the Senate. It is heartening to see someone standing up for the valuable work which does occur in Senate committees and occasionally in debate. There are other virtues to the book, primarily some decent anecdotes, but little that is new or enlightening. The portraits of other political figures are especially disappointing, given Davey's intimate association with the great Liberal politicians of the last quarter-century. He's too busy crowding the spotlight, and the famous people he does present remain dim, shadowy figures in the background. Someone with Davey's career should have had a better book in him than this one.

In a way, these two memoirs represent what's right and what's wrong with the current spate of political books. There is great potential for revealing the actual workings of government, and breathing some life into academics' flow charts. There is the chance to enliven dry historical studies with personal anecdotes or a fresh perspective. But there are always the pitfalls of self-promotion, justifying past mistakes, or conducting a literary vendetta against old opponents. Politicians, being human, tend to succumb to these latter temptations.

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**THE ROAD BACK, J. W. Pickersgill,
University of Toronto Press, Toronto,
1986, p. 255.**

Despite the spate of political books on the nation's bookshelves Jack Pickersgill's *The Road Back* should be required reading for Liberal Leader John Turner and his parliamentary caucus. In addition it will also be welcome reading for political junkies of all faiths. As suggested by the title the *Road Back* is a highly readable chronology of the Liberal Party in

opposition during the Diefenbaker years from 1957 to 1963.

Pickersgill has lost none of his partisanship and this is clearly illustrated in his description of the issues and personalities of a turbulent period in Canadian politics. This is particularly evident in the description of his political nemesis, John Diefenbaker. Time has not changed Pickersgill's views of the man, who in turn once described the author as "the only Member I've known who could strut sitting down". In turn, Pickersgill states "I welcomed every chance to clash with Diefenbaker and even created a few".

The events as outlined during the minority Conservative government in 1957 and the massive 1958 Diefenbaker landslide, while partisan, provide an enlightened view as seen through the eyes of one of the members of the small band of Liberals who survived.

The book begins with the surprise victory of the Prairie populist over Uncle Louis St. Laurent, the Chairman of the Board. Pickersgill leads us through the Liberal Leadership Convention which selected their new leader, Lester Pearson. The author provides some interesting insights into the convention particularly as it relates to Pearson's fateful decision to ask the new Conservative administration to "submit their resignation forthwith". This action led to what many observers claim was Diefenbaker's best political oration and the opening shot of the 1958 election which, up until the Mulroney sweep of 1984, was the largest majority in Canadian history.

Pickersgill then chronicles what he calls the three periods in the life of the Diefenbaker government and the Liberals in opposition – the "popular phase", the "ebbing tide" and the "disintegration of the government in 1963". We have an opposition front-bench seat as Pickersgill recounts the

events and personalities of the time – including the RCMP and the loggers' strike controversy in his native Newfoundland, the James Coyne Affair, the eventual collapse of the Diefenbaker government over the nuclear weapons issue and the election of the Liberals under Lester Pearson on April 8, 1963. The author also takes us

The Road Back

"PARLIAMENT WITHOUT PICKERSGILL WOULD BE LIKE HELL WITHOUT THE DEVIL!"



by a Liberal in Opposition
J.W. PICKERSGILL

through the first legislative session where he served, in addition to other responsibilities as House Leader.

Pickersgill's use of short titles throughout the text rather than individual chapters heightens the diary-like effect of his work. This reader also found the use of political

cartoons a refreshing change from all those political photo opportunity pictures which usually find their way into so many political recollections.

As far as comparing the Liberals in opposition in 1957 with 1984, circumstances, personalities and events are of course never constant, especially in politics! However, as Pickersgill notes "the Liberal defeat in 1984 was as crushing as had been our defeat in 1957". He comments on certain similarities between those days and the present and offers advice to his Liberal colleagues currently in the trenches.

Pickersgill gives credence to the adage that Governments are not defeated, they defeat themselves. He gives Diefenbaker 70% of the credit for the collapse of his government in 1963 and rates the Liberals at 30%. He cites the Liberals performance in the House, their rejuvenation of the party organization and the creation in the minds of Canadians that there was indeed a credible alternative as successful ingredients on the road back. Some of Pickersgill's views should be closely examined by those who presently serve in the Official Opposition.

I hope Jack Pickersgill does not wait another decade to write a sequel. His writing abilities are absorbing and interesting and while highly partisan (which one must keep in perspective), one hopes he might give us the benefits of his insights into the political life of our country since 1963. Until then, *The Road Back*, is a must read for anyone interested in what continues to be a fascinating period in our political history. For the Liberal Party, *The Road Back* might give some hints on their road ahead.

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