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Barry Cahill

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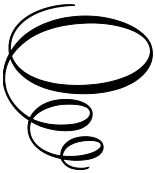

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In Memoriam

CWM

1943–1981

“Now, God be thanked who has matched me with his hour.”

—After Rupert Brooke, *1914*

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

At twenty-one years in office William Lyon Mackenzie King (1874–1950) was Canada's longest-serving prime minister. He is also the most written about. Why? Is it longevity, political savoir faire, electoral success (as Liberal Party leader he won five out of seven federal elections), unique importance bordering on greatness, eccentricities ("unsuspected personal idiosyncrasies")—or a combination thereof? There are some twenty biographies of King, published between 1922 and 2014. No other Canadian prime minister has yet attracted so high a degree of biographical interest. There are also numerous specialist monographs, biographical articles, essays in collective biographies and printed ephemera. George Henderson's bibliography of King, published in 1998, lists 173 "books and pamphlets about Mackenzie King and his era."[1] They continue to be written.

This is a collective study of all the known book-length biographies of King, from Owen McGillicuddy's *The Making of a Premier* (1922) to Allen Wells's *The First Canadian* (2014). It also covers the articles on King in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* and the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, which are authoritative. Content-wise, the biographies range from the hagiographic through the popular and journalistic to the academic historical. All but two were written in English. Five biographies, including the first serious one (Hardy, 1949), were published during King's lifetime. Pride of place belongs to the unfinished three-volume official biography, commissioned by King's literary executors after his death in order to compensate for the lack of the memoirs which King intended but did not live to write. Regrettably, however, the official biography, a work of exemplary scholarship, does not proceed beyond September 1939, thereby omitting the Second World War, post-war reconstruction, King's retirement as party leader and prime minister, and his decline and death. (An historiographical embarrassment if there ever was one.) The reason why the series was left incomplete—with so much left to say—has never been satisfactorily explained. The result is a serious lacuna in King historiography which no effort has been made to redress since the last volume, covering the years 1932–39, appeared—in 1976.

For over half a century Mackenzie King kept a candid personal diary in which he meticulously recorded both his public career and his private life. A selective and edited version of the mammoth diary (it is now

online and searchable) covering the years 1939 through 1948 appeared in four volumes between 1960 and 1970, while work on the official biography was still in progress. According to the Preface of the diary, "This book is not a biography, though it is an integral part of the biographical project undertaken by the literary executors of the late W. L. Mackenzie King shortly after his death in 1950."[2] The very existence of this multi-volume opus has distracted attention away from the failure of the literary executors to ensure that the official biography was in fact continued and completed.

An innovative approach to the realm of Mackenzie King's biography is to study critically its century-long history with a view to developing a radical new approach to King's life-writing: the biography which is fully emancipated from enslavement to sources, especially the King diaries, as well as from an over-focus on his mother, his maternal ancestry and his spiritualism.

Since this book was inspired by Christopher Dummitt's trailblazing monograph, *Unbuttoned: A History of Mackenzie King's Secret Life* (2017), I do not feel like a plagiarist by cribbing his preface. I tell not two stories in this book but 36. (A complete list in chronological order may be found at the end of the Prologue.) Each one is the story of how biographers of Mackenzie King dealt with or omitted to deal with King's "eccentric private activities" (p. xi)—namely his spiritualism—in the context of his larger private, less secret life and his public life. Though Dummitt refers to his book as "a kind of narrative history" (p. xi), it is really an historiography which focuses on the work of four major King biographers: C.P. Stacey, R. McGregor Dawson and H. Blair Neatby (the official biographers) and Ferns-Ostry. This book instead features a gallery of academic historians, hagiographers, journalists, psychobiographers, a novelist and a playwright, an author of juvenile literature, and popular writers both amateur and professional. Biographically, Mackenzie King is the gift that keeps on giving.

In contemporary Canadian academic circles biography is frowned upon as being unhistorical, little better than memoir and better ignored or perhaps written about, as I am doing, than written. Out of fashion are great men, especially male political leaders such as King. In a 2019 feature in the *Globe and Mail*, "We don't have the prime minister biographies we deserve—and Canadian history suffers for it" (16 April 2019), J. D. M. Stewart, author of *Being Prime Minister*, laments the state of the art. He is certainly right that new biographies of Laurier, Borden and St-Laurent are badly needed. He was right too, to complain: "Academics are not taking on the subject of Canadian prime ministerial biography and the country's understanding of itself suffers as a result." As Stewart points out, books

about individual prime ministers are still being written, Dummitt's being a superb recent example, but not scholarly biographies. The role of biography, whether individual or collective, is to inform history and make the chosen subject come alive in the minds of current readers. Biography both presents and represents its subject and the best way to make people seem real is through scholarly biography. Unscholarly biography, however popular or accessible it may be, serves no useful purpose. It is misleading, unreliable and does more harm than good.

My modest ambition, like Dummitt's, is twofold: to affirm a place for scholarly biography in the history of Mackenzie King; and to suggest, like Dummitt's narrative history, that biography "isn't just for popularizers or journalists or dead historians" (p. xiii). I hope, through a series of King biography case studies, to contribute to King historiography and to promote the further writing of scholarly biography of Mackenzie King, most especially the continuation and completion of the official biography, 1939 through 1950.

Throughout my analysis of the King biography case files, I engage with writers of the books concerned: describing, critiquing, correcting, arguing with or questioning their approach and their work; this in addition to historic contextualization, general commentary and conclusions drawn. Unlike Dummitt's, this book is concerned "with the many changes in historical meaning of Mackenzie King" (p. xiii) as they have been reflected over nearly a century in biographies of him written between 1922 and 2014. Biographical perspectives on him changed over the years. For example, books written about him after he became party leader and prime minister were very different from those written about him after his death.

The elephant in the room here, of course, is the revelation of King's spiritualism which came soon after his death. Oddly enough, it had minimal impact on biography until the later phased release of the diaries laid bare the full extent of it. This account aims to stimulate a scholarly debate on whether King's spiritualism is historically significant enough to make the biographical cut. It was, after all, a hobby. The biographer's job is to explain why it was so important to King, not to narrate its incidence in a voyeuristic manner with a view to drawing negative conclusions or making unfavourable judgments about him. The overemphasis on his spiritualism reflects its shock value and an anti-heroic tendency towards giant-killing.

Perceptions of King changed over the decades following his death, not because Canada was fast changing but because of the disclosure of his secret life. It had somehow diminished his achievement as the creator of modern Canada. That King was an agent and precursor of social change is undeniable, and Dummitt is at pains to forge a connection between it and

his spiritualism. “In the story of King’s secret life … we see one particular example of the rise of the individualistic, therapeutic culture of the self” (p. xviii). Is that a credible explanation of King’s spiritualism or does it merely describe the impact of its being disclosed when it was?

King’s demise triggered the revelations which his living longer, as he hoped and expected to, would have prevented. Both this book and Dummitt’s address “an accident—the fact that King died when he did and that he had secrets to reveal” (p. xiii). Had he lived to write his planned memoirs, there would have been no need or occasion for an official biography, and the incriminating diaries would have been destroyed, as King in his will directed they were to be. Had he lived, he would never have allowed them to be publicly disclosed. Once his literary executors had taken the giant step to preserve the diaries, however, it was only a matter of time before they were opened up to the public. Otherwise, there would have been no reason or ethical justification for disregarding King’s testamentary instructions.

Appendix: *Chronology of Mackenzie King Biographical Works*

Owen E. McGillicuddy. *The Making of a Premier. An Outline of the Life Story of the Right Hon. W. L. Mackenzie King, CMG* [Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George]. Toronto: Musson 1922. 91 p.

John Lewis. *Mackenzie King—The Man: His Achievements.* Toronto: Morang 1925. 136 p.

Norman McLeod Rogers. *Mackenzie King.* Toronto: Morang; Nelson & Sons 1935. 212 p.

Emil Ludwig. *Mackenzie King: A Portrait Sketch.* Toronto: Macmillan 1944. 62 p.

H. Reginald Hardy. *Mackenzie King of Canada: A Biography.* Toronto: Oxford University Press 1949. 390 p.

Frank Grierson. *William Lyon Mackenzie King: A Memoir Presented for the Earnest Consideration of all Patriotic Canadians*. [Ottawa: n. p. 1950]. 110 p.

Bruce Hutchison. *The Incredible Canadian. A candid portrait of Mackenzie King: his works, his times and his nation*. Toronto: Longmans, Green and Company 1952. 454 p.

H. S. Ferns and B. Ostry. *The Age of Mackenzie King [I]: The Rise of the Leader.* London: Heinemann 1955. 356 p.

R. MacGregor Dawson. *William Lyon Mackenzie King: A Political Biography 1874–1923.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1958. 521 p. (Volume One)

J. W. Pickersgill. *The Mackenzie King Record*, Volume 1: 1939–1944. Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1960. 723 p.

F. A. [Fred Alexander] McGregor. *The Fall & Rise of Mackenzie King: 1911–1919.* Toronto: Macmillan of Canada 1962. 358 p.

H. Blair Neatby. *William Lyon Mackenzie King, 1924–1932: The Lonely Heights.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1963. 452 p. (Volume Two)

J.W. Pickersgill and D. F. Forster. *The Mackenzie King Record*, Volume 2: 1944–1945. Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1968. 495 p.

——. *The Mackenzie King Record*, Volume 3: 1945–1946. Toronto. University of Toronto Press 1970. 424 p.

——. *The Mackenzie King Record*, Volume 4: 1947–1948. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970. 472 p.

H. Blair Neatby. *William Lyon Mackenzie King, 1932–1939: The Prism of Unity.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1976. 366 p. (Volume Three)

C. P. Stacey. *A Very Double Life: The Private World of Mackenzie King*. Toronto: Macmillan of Canada 1976. 256 p.

J. L. Granatstein. *W. L. Mackenzie King*. Don Mills ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside Limited 1976. 63 p. [*The Canadians*]

——. *Mackenzie King: His Life and World*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited 1977. 202 p.

William Teatero. *Mackenzie King: Man of Mission*. Thomas Nelson & Sons (Canada) Limited 1979. 192 p.

Joy E. Esberey. *Knight of the Holy Spirit: A Study of William Lyon Mackenzie King.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1980. 245 p.

Bernard Saint-Aubin. *King et son époque.* Montréal: Les éditions La Presse, Ltée 1982. 409 p.

Heather Robertson. *Willie: A Romance.* Toronto: James Lorimer & Company 1983. 359 p. [Volume 1 of *The King Years*]

——. *Lily: A Rhapsody in Red*. Toronto: James Lorimer & Company 1986. 327 p. [Volume 2 of *The King Years*]

——. *Igor: A Novel of Intrigue*. Toronto: James Lorimer & Company 1989. 250 p. [Volume 3 of *The King Years*]

Paul Roazen. *Canada's King: An Essay in Political Psychology*. Oakville ON: Mosaic Press, 1998. 177 p.

Luc Bertrand. *L'enigmatique Mackenzie King*. Vanier QC: Les Editions L'Interligne 2000. 155 p.

Lian Goodall. *William Lyon Mackenzie King: Dreams and Shadows*. Montreal: XYZ Publishing 2003. 181 p.

Nate Hendley. *William Lyon Mackenzie King: The loner who kept Canada together*. Toronto: JackFruit Press 2006. 56 p. [No. 10 in the series Canadian Prime Ministers—Warts & All]

Allan Levine. *King: William Lyon Mackenzie King: A Life Guided by the Hand of Destiny.* Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre 2011. 515 p.

Allen R. Wells. *The First Canadian: William Lyon Mackenzie King 1874–1950.* Bloomington IN: Xlibris 2014. 156 p.

CHAPTER ONE

THE OFFICIAL BIOGRAPHY (1958–1976)

R. MacGregor Dawson. *William Lyon Mackenzie King: A Political Biography 1874–1923.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1958. 521 p. (Volume One)

H. Blair Neatby. *William Lyon Mackenzie King, 1924–1932: The Lonely Heights.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1963. 452 p. (Volume Two)

H. Blair Neatby. *William Lyon Mackenzie King, 1932–1939: The Prism of Unity.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1976. 366 p. (Volume Three)

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Though it came about more or less directly as a result of the death of Mackenzie King on 22 July 1950, the official biography project may have been influenced by the publication, in October 1949, of the first serious biography of the former Prime Minister: journalist Reginald Hardy's *Mackenzie King of Canada*. Though King played no part in the preparation of the work, he informally assisted Hardy, a prominent member of the Parliamentary Press Gallery, with fact-checking and other relevant matters. Robert MacGregor Dawson, whom King's literary executors appointed official biographer in February 1951, signed the preface to the first volume of the official biography in May 1958.[3] Two months later he was dead, not having lived long enough to see its publication, which took place on 17 November of that year.

Dawson, professor of political economy at the University of Toronto, had been at work more or less continuously since June 1951. He took a full-time leave of absence from his university and moved to Ottawa in order to trawl through the massive body of King papers. By the time of his sudden and premature death, he had not only drafted several chapters of the second volume, covering the years 1921 through the outbreak of war in 1939, but had also prepared a detailed outline of the planned third and final

volume, taking King from the Second World War and post-war reconstruction to retirement and death.

Dawson's appointment begs the question why the literary executors chose a political scientist rather than a professional historian or historical biographer, neither of whom was in short supply in Canadian academe of the early 1950s. One thinks, for example, of Maurice Careless, Donald Creighton, A. R. M. Lower, Kenneth McNaught and Frank Underhill. Could the literary executors perhaps have thought that the best person to write the life of Canada's most successful politician was the country's most eminent student of politics and government? Dawson's not being an historian influenced, if not impoverished his approach. He tends to read the evidence retrospectively in light of King's success. Such a teleological method is unhistorical. One reads the evidence in terms of what happened before, not what happened after. Historical biography and political economy made strange bedfellows.

Despite Dawson's best efforts and the small army of research assistants and memoranda-writers he employed, he grossly underestimated the length of time the project would take: three years. Volume one took seven. According to the preface, "The research and writing which were involved in the assignment proved to be much heavier than they [the literary executors] or I had expected, and hence only now is the first volume in print. Much preliminary work, however, has been completed, and other volumes are expected to follow in due course" (p. vii). (Among the memorandists was Fred A. McGregor, a close associate of King's for decades who was the leading member of the literary executors and probably the one most responsible for the choice of Dawson as official biographer.)

The work is a straightforward conventional life—biography written by a non-historian, or as a non-historian thought it should be written. Dawson had never attempted any biography before and it is not clear what his models may have been. Yet his concept is clear from his original subtitle: "a political biography" which, tellingly, was dropped after Dawson's death in favour of more literary subtitles. The biography was "political" because its point and purpose, its rationale, was to explain how and why King went from mandarin to politician, became leader of the Liberal Party and, two years later, prime minister. Despite its extensive (but selective) use of personal information, the work is not a "personal" biography in any sense of the word.

William Lyon Mackenzie King has some strange features—even an unfinished look and feel—and shows evidence of being worked over, perhaps in haste, by other hands than Dawson's in the five months between his death in July and its publication in November. There is neither

introduction nor conclusion, nor a bibliography much less a comprehensive bibliography of King's published writings (for which scholars had to wait until 1998). His magnum opus, *Industry and Humanity*, published in 1918, when he was out of politics, lacks a main entry in the index, though it is of course covered, if rather begrudgingly in view of its importance. Indeed Dawson makes more fuss about King's "little volume" (*The Secret of Heroism: A Memoir of Henry Albert Harper*) on his good friend Bert Harper, who drowned accidentally in 1901 (p. 131). Dawson goes on at length about Harper and in doing so makes a tendentious claim which should not go unchallenged: "The place which Harper held in King's affections was never again filled" (p. 129). In fact, it was—by Norman McLeod Rogers (1894–1940), King's protégé and disciple after he became prime minister, and then a senior Cabinet minister, before he also died young and accidentally.

Dawson's book is an over-detailed chronicle in which there is far too much scenery and background. Sometimes context overwhelms content, and the connection between the two is not always clear. Dawson's insecurity and overreach are on display when, for example, he provides a lengthy footnote explaining the difference between arbitration and conciliation (pp. 97–8), as if he were drafting an undergraduate lecture or composing a textbook. Much of the grinding detail is irrelevant and could well have been jettisoned, easily reducing the length from 520 pages to 320. Dawson tends to be a prisoner of his plenteous sources, unable to liberate himself sufficiently to distinguish important historical evidence from dross. This problem could have been eliminated had the book been properly edited, which it appears not to have been. Despite, or perhaps because of the depth of detail, the book lacks focus until its latter stages. Everything is there but it is not always clear why. The reader cannot see the woods for the trees.

As a biographer, Dawson lacks authorial self-discipline. An example is the chapter on the First World War, during which King was not in Parliament. Dawson rambles on about the 1917 Union government, a reconstruction of the second Borden ministry comprising Conservatives and Liberals who (unlike King) opposed Laurier over conscription and the coalition government. The subject is irrelevant to King's then or subsequent career—and Dawson's prejudicial centralism is offensive. The prominent Nova Scotia MP, Daniel Duncan McKenzie, appointed interim party leader after Laurier's death in February 1919, is described as being "from outside Québec" (p. 283). This from a fellow native Nova Scotian! McKenzie's appointment as solicitor general in King's first Cabinet came in response to pressure from Nova Scotia which, according to Dawson, "was especially

aggrieved by the suggestion that for virtually the first time in her history she was to have only one minister [W. S. Fielding] in the Cabinet" (p. 366).

A peculiar solecism is the use of the American term Administration to describe a Canadian ministry in the two chapter titles concerned. One wonders too why King's first ministry, 1921–1925, with which the second volume was to have commenced, is not only tacked on to the end of the first, but also given two chapters: one covering December 1921 through 1922 and the other covering 1923. The volume should have ended with the 1921 election, as per Dawson's original plan. Too many cooks spoiled the broth. Moreover, we would know nothing of Dawson's projected third volume, covering the war, reconstruction and retirement (1939–1950), had not the University of Toronto Press, in 1961, published in book form his three chapters on the 1944 conscription crisis. *The Conscription Crisis of 1944* remains by far the best account of the subject.

Despite its many imperfections, Dawson's volume one deserves to be considered authoritative. At the very least it illuminates just how good, if not better, the next two volumes would have been had Dawson lived to write them. A case in point is his discussion of King's views on the role of political parties in the Canadian democracy, framed as a postscript to Dawson's gripping account of the August 1919 leadership convention which elected King party leader: "The danger of pursuing King's policy [of equating party with party government] is, of course, obvious, for the party leader will confuse the retention of office with the necessity of maintaining party unity, and jettison all principles in a frantic effort to stay in power at any cost. The discussion of this issue is better postponed until later events in King's life provide material for a judgment" (p. 320). Dawson the political biographer was looking ahead to the Second World War, while Dawson the political scientist was coming into his own with King's triumphant return to politics after an absence of eight years. Until that point in 1919 the book is relatively uninteresting; even its author seems by times bored and hence unsure of himself.

From and after King becoming party leader in August 1919, Dawson was writing political history and writing it deftly. We can almost hear him laughing when, after quoting Unionist minister Arthur Meighen's 4 November 1919 excoriation of King, he editorializes, "This lack of restraint in Mr Meighen's language is so marked that one is tempted to suggest that subconsciously he must have recognized his nemesis, who in future years was destined to bring about his defeat, his humiliation and his retirement from public life. ... Mr Meighen was yet to learn that there was a great deal more to political leadership than making brilliant speeches in the

House, and that he himself would prove capable of developing wider and more significant areas of ineptitude than King had ever dreamt of" (p. 331).

How one wishes that Dawson had lived to write his account of the 1926 constitutional crisis—the "King-Byng affair"—assuming of course that the account in the second volume of the official biography is not his. In fact, an anticipation of it appears at the very end of the chapter dealing with the 1921 federal election and Cabinet formation. The occasion was the outgoing prime minister's "political legerdemain." Just before he relinquished office, Meighen, who had been personally defeated in his Manitoba constituency, asked the new head of state, Baron Byng, to appoint to the civil service the young Conservative MP for Grenville ON, Arza Casselman. Obliged by his acceptance of an employment offer with the federal government, Casselman duly resigned his seat, which was immediately declared vacant. Meighen stood in the resulting by-election for what was, after all, a safe Conservative seat and was returned to Parliament. "In four and a half years' time [June 1926]," Dawson writes,

> Byng was to find himself in another quandary which was not entirely alien to this one although in the interval the two rivals for office [King and Meighen] had changed places. But the general problem which he had to face was in many ways the same. He perceived in each dispute the desire to gain a political advantage; he was shocked by the same appearance of what to him was unfairness and lack of generosity; he felt the same need to offer his protests and remonstrances; and he was tempted by the same impulse to substitute his own judgment for that of his constitutional advisers and in so doing raise his voice on behalf of the absent opponent who was unable to defend himself. The two cases presented, of course, a number of different and distinguishing features, and Lord Byng added yet another: in the first dispute he followed the advice of his prime minister [Meighen], and in the second he rejected it (p. 376).

The final two chapters of volume one, dealing with the first two years of King's first ministry, 1922 and 1923, focus on politics rather than government while including an overlong digression on the League of Nations and what Dawson styles the "Chanak crisis" (September 1922). Canada's refusal to support Britain in a threatened war against the Turks who were endeavoring to drive Greek troops out of Turkish territory, signified a new assertion of independence in foreign relations. "Before becoming involved in this question, however, it is necessary to make a brief[!] departure to indicate the general attitude of Canada to international and imperial affairs at this time" (p. 401). *Au contraire*, such a digression

was scarcely necessary or appropriate or, for that matter, even helpful. This, and the account of the looming Anglo-Turkish war are a fascinating, if quite irrelevant, disquisition belonging more properly to diplomatic history, not a political biography of Mackenzie King.

Sadly, it encompasses yet another anti-Meighen diatribe and epitomizes Dawson's tendency to wander off-topic and indulge his own political prejudices or preoccupations. Arthur Meighen's dislike or envy of Mackenzie King is part of Meighen's biography, not King's. Another digression, comparing their leadership styles, is neither necessary nor appropriate. Dawson also has trouble letting go of the Chanak incident, drawing therefrom lessons about King which seem to belabour the obvious: "To return to Chanak and its implications. Mackenzie King must not be regarded as an extreme nationalist who desired to break off the connection with Great Britain and the rest of the Empire. He was most emphatically against [imperial] centralization and in favour of Canadian self-government, but he was equally anxious to preserve Canadian membership in the Commonwealth" (p. 419). This distracting gloss also ignores that in 1922 the British Commonwealth of Nations—successor to the Empire—did not yet exist.

Dawson's closing chapters on the first two years of the King government, especially the earlier one covering 1922, frustrate because they have little to say about what the King government actually did. The focus is almost exclusively on politics, Dawson being obsessed with the Progressive Party, and external relations. It is hard to agree with him that "to give in any detail all the labours of the 1923 [parliamentary] session is beyond the scope of this volume" (p. 445) when his subject is the Prime Minister. More emphasis on the foreground and less on the background would have been helpful.

The book concludes with an extended account of the 1923 Imperial Conference in London at which the principle that each Empire country could pursue an independent foreign policy was recognized. Significant as it was for the constitutional development of Canada, the conference was not significant in the political biography of Mackenzie King and hardly justifies the depth of detail accorded it by Dawson. It comes as no surprise that King put Canadian interests ahead of British ones or imperial cooperation. Dawson's microscopic treatment of the conference, however, might not commend itself to the professional historian, mindful of context and perspective, who would have asked different questions: did the conference affect Canadians' view of King? Did it interest them at all? All we learn from the thick, almost moment-by moment narrative is that Dawson swallowed King's view of its importance and of his own role in it. Too

often, as in this instance, the biography reads as if it were King's ghost-written memoirs. (Interestingly, King's diary is largely absent for the period of the conference.) What was going on in Canada during the two months King was absent? Dawson does not even tell us who the acting Prime Minister was.

The overemphasis on the Imperial Conference contributes mightily to the book's disequilibrium and lack of perspective. Indeed, it simply stops rather than concludes—with a tribute to King's "remarkable performance" (p. 480), of which Dawson obviously thoroughly approved. Yet one has to wonder whether ending the volume abruptly in 1923 and in that way was Dawson's intention or the work of someone else. It seems both artificial and illogical: King out of the country as well as out of context. The tension between political biography written by a political scientist and political biography written by an historian is thus highlighted and patently obvious.

Dawson's work was complicated by the appearance of two major biographies of King in 1952 and 1955, respectively: Bruce Hutchison's *The Incredible Canadian*, with which Dawson briefly engages (p. 251); and Henry Ferns and Bernard Ostry's *The Rise of the Leader*, which he ignores. The Ferns-Ostry book, which followed King from birth (1874) through winning the Liberal Party leadership (1919) and was meant to be the first instalment of an aborted full biography, *The Age of Mackenzie King*, caused a sensation for its intensely negative, hypercritical treatment of King. Ferns reviewed Dawson's book in the *Canadian Historical Review* in March 1959. His review, though predictably hostile, is nevertheless fair and accurate: "Professor Dawson's experiment in combining scholarship and apologetics is now before us … [and it] deserves and requires the closest study because it is a book both bad and important. Its importance derives from the abundance of information it contains; its badness principally from the methods and technique of political science applied to a task which only an historian should have been asked to undertake."[4]

Further light on the history of the book and Dawson's intentions for it is shed by a brief biographical essay on him written in 1969 by an MLIS candidate at Dalhousie University, where the Dawson papers are held:

> The original plan was to write the biography in two volumes, and to accomplish this in three years. However, this plan was extended to three volumes, and after six years [1957] the biography was not half done. ... Dawson did not begin his work with a study of the ancestry and early life of his subject. Instead he began at once on the problem of the constitutional issue under Lord Byng [1926] and the conscription issue near the end of the

> Second World War [1944]. He knew that these were the key problems and he was anxious to write them up while the men who had taken part in them were still alive.[5]

Who interposed to change Dawson's plans and bring out a different book from the one he intended? Those persons named in the preface might provide some clue. One wonders, for example, what was contributed by Francess Halpenny, editor-in-chief at the University of Toronto Press, through taking on "textual revision and criticism as a special assignment" (p. x). Conspicuous by his absence from the introductory acknowledgments is Dawson's principal assistant and then replacement as official biographer: one Blair Neatby.

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By the end of 1957 Dawson's health had failed to the point where it was clear to the literary executors that without assistance he could not carry on. Their, or Dawson's, choice fell on Blair Neatby (1924–2018), assistant professor of history at the University of British Columbia, who began work at Laurier House—King's former residence in Ottawa, turned project headquarters—in May 1958. A 1956 PhD of the University of Toronto whose dissertation, "Laurier and a Liberal Québec," was supervised by no less a figure than the eminent historian, Frank Underhill, Neatby was a rising star. He had graduated top of his class from the University of Saskatchewan in 1950, then gone on to Oxford University (Exeter College), where he graduated BA in modern history in 1952.

Robert MacGregor Dawson, age 63, died in a Halifax hospital of a cerebral haemorrhage on 16 July 1958. King's literary executors lost no time activating the succession plan. The following day, Fred McGregor announced in Ottawa that Blair Neatby had been appointed official biographer in place of Dawson. The University of British Columbia granted Neatby a three-year leave of absence to carry on the work. Over a period of eighteen years, 1958–1976, Neatby would write two volumes of the official biography, taking King's life from 1923 to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939.

Though Neatby's first volume, unlike Dawson's, was not subtitled "a political biography," it nevertheless is one no less than Dawson's. On the outside the two works look the same: no introduction, no conclusion, no bibliography; internally, however, they are quite different. Neatby opts for a quaint subtitle and chapter titles rather than fact- or event-based ones as Dawson had done. One very much doubts whether King would have seen the later years of his first ministry as "the lonely heights." Heights yes,

lonely no. The nineteen chapter titles continue in the same vein: "The Reins of Office"—King had already been office for two years when the volume opens—and are generally unhelpful, as they effectively prevent the reader from discerning content or even chronology. The nine years covered by the volume were eventful: three federal elections, the 1926 constitutional crisis and the loss of power in 1930.

Neatby seems to have modelled his work not on Dawson's first volume but on Donald Creighton's biography of Sir John A. Macdonald: an authoritative work by an historian like himself which Neatby regarded as "the best Canadian biography."[6] It is difficult to escape the conclusion that Neatby was, consciously or subconsciously, rejecting Dawson's work in favour of biography written by historians like Creighton and himself. In any case, the elimination of Dawson's subtitle, "a political biography," is highly suggestive.

The brief, eight-page first chapter is instead in the nature of an introduction or recapitulation. Neatby does not by any means begin where Dawson ended. The significant transition is from biographer to biographer. Different author, different book, same subject, same ground covered twice in different ways. Had Dawson lived to write it, volume two would have been more like volume one. In Neatby's hands there is no continuity. Neatby, himself already a prime ministerial biographer in light of his PhD thesis on Laurier, was emancipating himself from Dawson. One senses that the two authors had very different views of Mackenzie King, not to mention the methodologically irreconcilable perspectives of the political scientist and the historian. Nor does Neatby hesitate to upstage Dawson. His brief account of the 1923 Imperial Conference in chapter one (pp. 6–7) is more pointed and effective than Dawson's lengthy narrative at the end of volume one. Neatby also reprises King's "preoccupation" with the Progressive Party, the second largest party in the House in 1921–1925, but is less sympathetic to King than Dawson, and in the introductory first chapter he seems to be distancing himself from his predecessor's generally favourable and uncritical treatment.

Neatby's second chapter opens with the embarrassing Halifax by-election loss of December 1923. He does not overstate its importance, but neglects to explain it. The former MP, Alexander Kenneth Maclean, appointed president of the Exchequer Court in November 1923, had been Nova Scotia's most prominent Unionist Liberal and a member of Borden's Union government. He was re-elected as a Liberal in the general election of 1921, when the Liberals swept Nova Scotia. What had happened to turn Halifax so strongly against the Liberals? The political situation in Halifax in the early 1920s was a good deal more complex than Neatby paints it.

When it came to the Progressive Party and the Lausanne Conference (chapter three), Neatby again tends to cover the same ground as Dawson did towards the end of volume one. Indeed, Neatby's chapter three ("Educating Downing Street") is entirely taken up with Anglo-Canadian relations, the course of which was not running smoothly in view of King's nationalism versus the British government's neo-colonialist attitude towards the self-governing "dominions." The "issue" King was "in search of" (chapter four) in 1925 was one on which successfully to fight the next election, which had to take place either that year or in 1926. King had no accomplishments to which he could point, except that he had held the Liberal Party and government together and had made a name for himself on the imperial stage, little as that meant or mattered to the voter.

King's pre-election reconstruction of the cabinet, to which Neatby gives several pages in chapter five ("The Hung Jury") did not have the desired rejuvenating effect in the eyes of the electorate. The general election of October 1925 was instead a disaster for the Liberals, reducing them to minority status. As the Conservatives lacked a clear majority, however, and the Liberals could count on Progressive support, King decided to remain in office—despite having lost his own seat.

Chapter six ("Parliament Will Decide") is Neatby's account of the aftermath of the election and ends on the eve of the opening of the 15th Parliament on 7 January 1926. In it Neatby, quoting King's diary, allows that the heavenly spirits of deceased family members were guiding King on how best to cope with disaffection within Liberal ranks in light of the election defeat (p. 88). In a newspaper interview conducted at the time of his appointment, Neatby candidly admitted that King's diary "provides evidence that Mr King believed he had had contacts with his mother following her death, and that she gave him moral support in his work."[7] (This at a time when King's spiritualism was not known beyond the range of his intimates.) Does Neatby take King's fantasy seriously?

Chapter seven ("The Will of the Majority") opens with the speech from the throne on 7 June and ends with May 1926, while the session itself continued into early July, when Parliament was dissolved. The most important developments through here were King's return to Parliament as MP for Prince Albert in February and the appointment of Charles Dunning, premier of Saskatchewan, to the cabinet later that month. But there was a looming threat: a customs scandal over smuggling at the Port of Montreal which involved collusion on the part of an official of the Department of Customs and Excise. To make matters worse, high-level corruption in the department was alleged to be rampant. The situation was bad and would

only become much worse in light of the tabling of the report of the bipartisan select committee appointed to investigate.

Chapter eight ("A House Divided") covers the notorious constitutional crisis of 1926 which no one saw coming. In the course of his otherwise excellent account, Neatby twice commits a howler which Dawson would never have done and which his editor did not catch, namely referring to a public inquiry (royal commission) as a "judicial" inquiry or investigation (p. 141). King obtained the brief parliamentary adjournment he needed in order to avert the motion of censure amounting to non-confidence, a motion which the government almost certainly would have lost; but Byng, the head of state, refused King's request for a dissolution. Somewhat surprisingly, Neatby defends the governor general's decision: "In refusing King's advice he made the right decision for the wrong reasons" (p. 149), that is, in order to give Meighen the opportunity to form a government. King resigned on 28 June 1926, and Arthur Meighen was invited to form a government, which was itself defeated in the House three days later. Parliament was thereupon dissolved and an election called for September.

Chapter nine ("The Jury Decides") covers the 1926 election, returning the Liberals to power which the working majority denied them in 1925. Neither the constitutional impasse nor the customs scandal had any impact on the voters. Neatby makes the striking observation: "The real significance of the constitutional issue was that it fostered a myth of Mackenzie King's political infallibility" (p. 170). It was perhaps not clearly recognized then or later that the head of state, by denying his Prime Minister's request for a dissolution, had handed King a political gift which he exploited to the full. Chapter nine also introduces James Layton Ralston who would be a major force in Canadian politics and government for eighteen years.

Chapter ten ("Defining the Undefinable") deals with the Imperial Conference, which followed hard on the election. According to Neatby, "The Imperial Conference of 1926 was significant because for the first time there was talk of secession from the British Commonwealth" (p. 176). What he means by "defining the undefinable" was a precise statement of intra-imperial relations ("definition of the status of the dominions") but falling short of a Commonwealth constitution (p. 186). In the course of his discussion Neatby uses the striking phrase, "declaration of the independence of the dominions" (p. 184), in other words equality of status in relation to each other and Great Britain. King's achievement in this instance was to obtain a determination that the Governor General as head of state was purely a viceroy, not an agent of the British Government, and so above politics—

as Baron Byng had failed to be in 1926. The Prime Minister, not the Governor General, spoke for Canada in government-to-government communications. The result was the appointment of a British ambassador to Canada in 1928. As he points out, "the eventual appointment of a Canadian governor general for Canada was a predictable result" (p. 1988). As late as 1946, King would be prevented from the reverse—appointing a Canadian as governor general. The rest of the chapter is taken up with the Department of External Affairs, of which King was ex officio minister, plus the modest expansion of the diplomatic corps and Canada at the League of Nations.

Chapter eleven ("The Good Life") descends from high politics and public policy to King the man. It is chiefly important for its account of how King became a spiritualist (pp. 202–3). The Kingston medium, Rachel Bleaney, whose client King was, is introduced. Chapter eleven also provides this unflattering word-painting of King, executed as if in the year 1927: "He was no crusader, eager to ride a white charger to oblivion" (p. 207)—"This metaphor was suggested by J. W. Pickersgill" (p. 426n20). In Neatby's hands King is a power-mad hypocrite and monomaniac without any redeeming features whose mother would never be dead so long as he were alive.

Chapter twelve ("Tinkering with Federalism") focuses on Canada: economic expansion and federal-provincial relations. The economy was in good shape. "Canada's century seemed finally to have arrived" (p. 210). A major achievement of the parliamentary session, which began 9th December 1926, the day after King returned home from the Imperial Conference, was the enactment of old age pensions. Neatby also provides a fine brief account of the report of the Royal Commission on Maritime Claims (Duncan Commission), tabled on the opening day of Parliament. Despite that the achievements of the session were limited, one must not discount the arrival in Parliament of one James Lorimer Ilsley, MP for Hants-Kings in Nova Scotia, who in years to come would do great things for Canada. It is surprising to see Neatby refer to the new leader of the Conservative Party, Richard Bedford Bennett MP, as a "westerner" (p. 231); he was in fact an expatriate New Brunswicker who as young man had gone west and made a fortune. Otherwise, the main event of 1927 was the First Ministers' Conference, the first since 1918. Held in November, it gave Neatby his chapter title, though even "Tinkering" seems to overstate the case. The meeting confirmed the financial and constitutional status quo to everyone's satisfaction and King considered the conference "a major triumph" (p. 242).

Chapter thirteen ("The Politics of Prosperity") narrates the year 1928, in which nothing important happened: "In fact, there were no surprises during the year. Events did go almost according to plan" (p. 244).

Immigration, Manitoba provincial politics, Liberal-Progressive relations, and relations with Ottawa; the Royal Commission on the transfer of natural resources to Manitoba; and the St Lawrence Seaway project—all are covered. Canada having been elected to the council of the League of Nations, King was more or less obliged to lead the delegation to the league's autumn assembly. But he combined business with pleasure, vacationing in Italy, calling on Mussolini and stopping in Paris to open Canada's new legation. "Mackenzie King returned from Europe full of enthusiasm and good resolutions" (p. 265). King was especially pleased—struck with an "ecstatic reaction" (p. 266) in Neatby's words—to the improved financial position that year of Canadian National Railways. There follows a lengthy and admiring, if quite unnecessary digression on CN's American head, Sir Henry Thornton. The politics of prosperity meant, in Neatby's words, that "government, by 1928, was inclined to interpret national prosperity as proof that most problems had been solved" (p. 270), thanks to Liberal economic policies. R. B. Bennett's doomsday prophecy that they were instead "leading to disaster" lacked credibility.

Chapter fourteen ("Looking South") has King contemplating 1929 as if it were another 1928. The universe was unfolding as it should; according to Neatby, "For Mackenzie King, 1929 seemed to promise a continuing spiral of prosperity and political popularity. The policies of his administration were firmly established. Politics had been reduced to diplomacy" (p. 272). The seaway project, railway expansion, and Canadian-American relations (as per the title) are all covered. Also discussed is King's western tour—his first since the election—in which he endeavoured to extinguish political fires in Manitoba and Saskatchewan (where the recent election saw the Liberals nearly turned out of office). Neatby considers the natural resources transfer agreements with the western provinces, negotiated that year, as "probably the major achievement" of King's third ministry (p. 298).

Chapter fifteen ("Shoring up the Old Order") begins with the end of the year in which the Great Depression began. Neatby's title nicely sums up King's initial attitude towards it. The stock market might collapse but the economy would not; it would automatically self-correct: "At the time of the stock market crash, King appears to have been completely unaware that anything unusual had happened" (p. 301). His mind instead was on election politics, the country having to go to the polls in 1930 or 1931 and King with every expectation that his government would be returned to office.

Neatby begins his account of the onset of the Depression with a lengthy discussion of King's personal finances, which seems oddly inappropriate, out of place and even deliberately ironic. Neatby then

concludes his account of the Prime Minister's impassivity between October 1929 and February 1930 (when Parliament opened) as follows: "In the early days of 1930 ... King behaved like a conservative. The stock market crash seemed irrelevant. The economic difficulties on the prairies and elsewhere were temporary. Unemployment was not a federal responsibility" (p. 312). Such willful blindness would cost the Liberals the election. Neatby makes the telling point, "For Mackenzie King the future did not extend beyond the next election" (p. 313), which was only five months away. King was supremely confident that the government, running on its record, would be re-elected.

Neatby occasionally loses patience with King's hypocritical moralizing and lack of any sense of proportion, as in this sarcastic aside: "The [1930] decision to abolish liquor clearances did not noticeably affect the course of Canadian history" (p. 315). King indeed seemed out of touch with reality, unwilling to recognize or acknowledge that the increasing unemployment rate was already critical: the problem was systemic, not a matter of seasonal adjustment. Neatby's account of King's notorious "five-cent-piece" Freudian slip in the course of debate on 3 April 1930 on a Labour motion for unemployment insurance suggests that King regarded Depression-induced unemployment as more a political than an economic problem. "The 'five-cent speech' would long be remembered, and after this experience King was even less likely to be so frank again" (p. 318).

The Prime Minister consulted Mrs Bleaney as to when to call the election. He did not doubt the certainty of a Liberal victory, whether it was held in 1930 or 1931, but Mrs Bleaney, unwilling to commit herself to either year, was equally certain of a positive outcome. Neatby's account (p. 322) is tongue-in-cheek but it is amazing that he should mention "a fortune-teller" at all, let alone question whether her "prognostications" may have had any impact on King's decision. That Mrs. Bleaney turned out to be wrong was scarcely her fault. Parliament was dissolved at the end of May and the election called for 28 July.

The title of chapter sixteen, "The Call to Action," nicely sums up the Conservative election campaign theme. R. B. Bennett took advantage of Liberal inertia. "Where King promised caution, Bennett promised action" (p. 327). Neatby rightly makes much of the fact that the Prime Minister was far more enthusiastic about, and better prepared for the election than was the Liberal Party itself. Ageing and ill Senator Andrew Haydon, the national organizer, was undoubtedly important but by 1930 he was no longer "Mackenzie King's most trusted political adviser" (p. 331). That mantle had fallen on Norman McLeod Rogers, King's protégé, a former senior secretary of the Prime Minister turned professor of political science at

Queen's University. For Mackenzie King the Depression was still not even an issue—but it was becoming one for Canadians. The government in power seemed to have little to offer except an assurance of ending the increasing chaos with more laissez-faireism. Election day saw the Liberals decisively defeated, an outcome for which King must bear the chief responsibility. Had the election been deferred for another year, there would have been plenty of time for the prime minister to wake up and develop and implement the necessary policies to deal with mass unemployment. Instead, King's blind faith in his own omniscience had proved misplaced.

The book should have ended there. The reason why it did not is that the original plan was to carry the second volume of the official biography to 1939. But Neatby (or the literary executors) decided that two volumes rather than one were needed, so a decision had to be made where to end the first. Why 1932? It was no watershed in King's life or career. Nor was any other year before 1939 except for 1935, when the Liberals were returned to power. A concluding chapter covering King's five years as leader of the opposition would have been appropriate, but instead the reader is treated to three chapters: one dealing with the Bennett government and the Depression ("A Remedy is Prescribed"), one examining the Beauharnois Scandal ("The Valley of Humiliation") and one outlining the failure of the Conservative government to deal effectively with the economic disaster ("The Distortions of Reality"). A section of this final chapter dealing with King's personal life, including his loneliness, omits altogether to mention Norman McLeod Rogers, King's closest friend and confidante. They exchanged visits to Kingston and Ottawa and were in constant touch, King even inviting Rogers to a seance. Neatby's argument that "1932 was a year of transition" for King (p. 410) is tendentious; the year was largely uneventful.

Volume two was published in October 1963, shortly before Neatby's move from UBC to Carleton University in Ottawa, where he would spend the rest of his long and distinguished career. *The Lonely Heights* was still a work in progress when, in 1960, J. W. Pickersgill, the literary executor who was recruited after Dawson's death to write the volume of the official biography covering the years 1939 through 1950, published the first of a four-volume series: *The Mackenzie King Record*, comprising extracts from King's diaries, 1939–1948. The purpose of this venture was to provide a documentary sourcebook and supplement to volume three as it had originally been projected (1939–1950). But as that volume failed to materialize—Neatby's work, and the entire official biography project, stopped at 1939—*The Mackenzie King Record* grew in standalone importance until it began to be perceived as the continuation and

conclusion of the official biography, a false assumption which Pickersgill himself was at pains to deny.

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Blair Neatby's second volume (1976), the third and last of the suspended official biography to be published, covers the years 1932 through 1939. Despite the meaningless subtitle, this time "The Prism of Unity," Neatby has introduced improvements over the previous volume. The chapter titles are for the most part concrete rather than metaphorical and there is both a proper introduction and an embryonic bibliography. By 1976, when the volume appeared, various factors were at work to shift perceptions of King, then dead for nearly thirty years. In the preface Neatby points out, for example, how King's public image had been "modified by the revelation of a private world where he indulged in a fascination for the occult and communed with the spirits of departed relatives and friends" (p. vii). In that connection, February 1976 saw the publication in *Canadian Forum* of Reginald Whitaker's "Mackenzie King in the Dominion of the Dead." Much had changed since 1963, when Neatby's first volume was published. In 1975 the massive King archive became the property of the national archives and was thus no longer subject to access restrictions imposed by the literary executors. King's diaries up to 1944 was also opened to researchers. The following year saw the publication of C. P. Stacey's controversial *A Very Double Life: The Private World of Mackenzie King*, a study of King's personal life which shredded the veil and changed the face of Mackenzie King biography forever.

Neatby thanked J. W. Pickersgill, one of the literary executors, for having read the entire manuscript "and spared me the embarrassment of some mistakes" (p. viii). By 1976 two of the original four literary executors, Norman Robertson and Fred McGregor, were deceased, so Neatby decorously makes no reference to the mysterious collective decision to abandon the biographical project at 1939. Nor, perhaps for obvious reasons, does he mention Stacey's recently published book, which he would afterwards describe as "tendentious." Timing is everything.

Chapter one ("The Ottawa Trade Agreements"), though happily coinciding with the transitional year 1932, is redundant, as King did not participate in the British Empire Economic Conference (July–August 1932), which was chaired by Prime Minister Bennett; Liberal parliamentarians, with but one exception, voted against approving them. The exception was James Lorimer Ilsley, whom since 1926 was a backbench MP for Nova