

Mike: The Memoirs of the Rt. Hon. Lester B. Pearson, vols. I-III
by Lester B. Pearson

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in a coda that linked historical to current racism? In any case, discussing in detail the actual resonances between historical and contemporary iterations of one movement or problem would have been more effective and instructive than the quick and general gestures, however powerful they are as solidarity gestures.

If there's a criticism that can be levelled at the book, it's that its institutional focus, its attention to unions specifically as opposed to the wider working class culture of Hamilton in the period, feels a bit limited, a bit old-fashioned as labour history. There is some discussion of food, fun, and music, but it's all pretty much connected to the success of the strike. Labour history is about more than unions, and while the story of how unions were made is important, changes in working class culture are probably more important to understanding the current political and social moment. And the institutional focus raises the further question of whether comic readers are being condescended to: like undergraduates presented with all-killer-no-filler course options, are they assumed

to only hunger for action? Will they only gain insight by stealth?

It's notable, in this respect, that the current issue the book draws attention to in connection with labour politics is the Harper government's attacks on unions, bills C-377 and C-525. The Harper agenda was destructive without a doubt, but it does little to explain the decline in effectiveness and energy on the part of unions over the last many decades. Strikes like the one described in *Showdown* are highly unlikely now because of changes in the culture of class, to say nothing of the state and the economy, not because of laws that affect unions, most of which are unchanged. Ignoring culture, in fact, drives a teleological current in the book (signalled in the subtitle *Making Modern Unions*) that underlines what we have that the people in the story lacked, rather than what we lack and they had: strong and effective bonds of class solidarity.

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Mike: The Memoirs of the Rt. Hon. Lester B. Pearson, vols. I-III

by Lester B. Pearson

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015.

Volume I, 326 pages. \$32.95 paper, ISBN 9781442615649. \$32.95 ebook (EPUB format) ISBN 9781442668645.

Volume II, 372 pages. \$32.95 paper, ISBN 9781442615656. \$32.95 ebook (EPUB format) ISBN 9781442668669.

Volume III, 366 pages. \$32.95 paper, ISBN 9781442615663. \$32.95 ebook (EPUB format) ISBN 9781442668683.

Donald Creighton never forgave “the giggling bow-tied bastard,” later confessing to a journalist, “I feel positive hatred towards that man.” According to Creighton’s historical calculus, Lester Pearson had abandoned Great Britain during the Suez Crisis and later severed Canada’s symbolic connection to what used to be called its mother country when he insisted on the Maple Leaf over the Red Ensign. Even

worse, Canada’s fourteenth prime minister accepted the premise of bilingualism when he appointed the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism. It cut both ways because Pearson didn’t think much of Creighton. When Frank Underhill sent him an offprint, he thanked him “for reducing some of Donald Creighton’s views to historical perspective and accuracy,” adding that he intended “to borrow from it shame-

lessly” in future speaking engagements. And in a thinly veiled reference to Canada’s leading historian, he cited “the weakness of professors of history when they start mingling with contemporary events.”

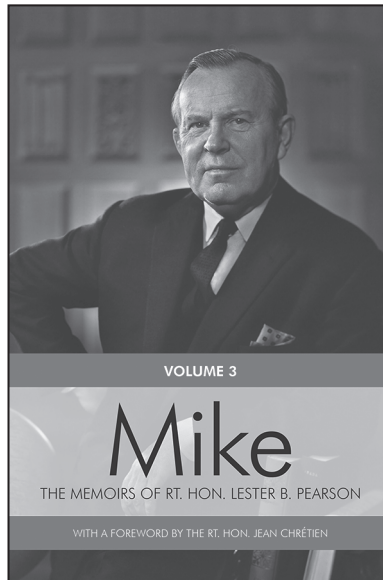
On the one hand, the disagreement between Creighton and Pearson was silly and petty, especially on Creighton’s part. But on the other hand, it points to what José Igartua called the Other Quiet Revolution: that still-not-fully understood transformation of English Canada from an ethnically British nation to a bilingual and eventually multicultural nation premised on equality. Like any revolution, the Other Quiet Revolution had winners and losers, or Pearsons and Creightons. God knows, I have spent long enough with Donald Creighton on the assumption that historians “have a peculiar duty towards losers, not out of mere perversity, but because much is to be learned from them,” to quote Syd Wise. This review, therefore, represents an opportunity to spend time with a man whose remarkable diplomatic and political career led *Maclean’s Magazine* in 2016 to rank him as Canada’s fifth best prime minister, just behind Pierre Trudeau.

“God was in His heaven and Queen Victoria on her throne”: it’s a great opening hook, capturing the key assumptions of Lester Pearson’s childhood and adolescence in small-town Ontario. (I, 3) His father was a Methodist minister; his mother was a minister’s wife, an important role in both the church and in the larger community; and together they emphasized the virtues

of family, faith, education, hard work, temperance, and service. In Pearson’s words, his boyhood was “a cycle of home, church, and school.” (I, 9) When the Duke and Duchess of York travelled by train through Aurora, Ontario in 1902, the Pearsons joined the large crowd of well-wishers and rubber-neckers anxious to catch a glimpse of their future king and queen. At Victoria College, a young Pearson lived in Burwash Hall, studied history, got good grades, and played a ton of sports. But when World War I started in his sophomore year, he felt an obligation to serve. “I had a normal patriotic instinct—more British, I suppose, at this time than Canadian—and based on conventional impressions from the kind of history I had been taught. War was still a romantic adventure.” (I, 17) In the spring of 1915 he wrote his exams and promptly enlisted.

According to Pearson, the war’s “pointless sacrifice” and “senseless slaughter” disillusioned him. “King and country? Freedom and democracy? These words sounded hollow in 1918 and we increasingly rebelled against their hypocrisy.” (I, 36)

. Not exactly, according to his biographer. Contemporary sources tell a different story, revealing a young man who supported conscription and Great Britain. Memoirs are tricky things: sometimes self-serving, they can be misleading. But if handled with care, and checked against other sources, they can be utterly revealing. In any event, Pearson’s war ended when he was hit by a bus during a blackout. Later diagnosed with neurasthenia, he never made



it to the front.

After the war, he returned to Vic, graduating in 1919. After working for a couple of years, he went to Oxford in 1921 where he fell under what he once called its “spell” and where he played lacrosse and hockey but somehow earned a respectable second. In 1923 he returned to the University of Toronto where he taught history. He and Creighton even overlapped each other in Baldwin House in 1927-28. Although the imperative of “research and scholarly production as the first requirement for prestige and promotion had not descended on us,” Pearson began research for a book on the Loyalists. (I, 51) It wasn’t for him. More interested in the present than in the past, he wrote his exams for the Department of External Affairs, finished first, and was offered an appointment as first secretary with a generous salary of \$3,900 and “good opportunity for promotion.” (I, 59)

Surely he meant that as an understatement: his salary wasn’t the only thing in the “stratosphere,” to use his word, so too was his career path. (I, 59) Successful postings in Ottawa, London, and Washington brought him back to Ottawa in 1946 as under-secretary of state for external affairs. Two years later, he entered politics and was appointed to cabinet as secretary of state for external affairs where he would remain for the next eleven years and where he would be recognized as one of the most important diplomats in the world. His wife Maryon once joked that behind every great man was a surprised woman. Maybe. But Pearson brought what today might be called an impressive skill-set to every table he ever sat at: smart, focused, and hardworking, he was a quick study who knew how to navigate the corridors of power and who understood the art and science of diplomacy. In short, people liked and respected him. When a reporter called to tell him that he

had won the 1957 Nobel Prize for Peace, he responded with “Gosh!” (II, 275)

The world of diplomacy can be intractable but the world of elected politics can be vicious. It can also be capricious. The Diefenbaker upset of 1957 followed by the Diefenbaker sweep of 1958 sent the Liberals and their new leader into the wilderness of opposition. Watching the 1958 returns, Maryon broke down: “We’ve lost everything; we’ve even won our own constituency!” (III, 37) Of course, it turned out to be a blessing in disguise because it allowed Pearson and the Liberal Party to re-think Liberalism. “The five years in opposition were, strangely enough, a most productive, rewarding, and stimulating time.” (III, 38) In an effort to reinvent the party Pearson reached out, asking Liberals, non-Liberals, and even anti-Liberals for their advice. Arthur Lower reminded him of the importance of civil liberties and told him to look out for a young Quebec intellectual named Pierre Trudeau: “Here is a new Quebec, a realistic young Quebec that has outgrown chauvinist nationalism and parochial clericalism both.”

The Study Conference on National Problems, better known as the Thinkers Conference, held at Queen’s University in 1960 confirmed for Pearson that the Liberal Party had to tack left: progressive reforms, including a national healthcare plan and a national pension plan, were the order of the day. “We could not be successful unless we were a truly liberal party, progressive enough to attract people who might otherwise turn to the New Democratic Party.” (III, 54) Two elections and three years later, Pearson began the final stretch of what he called his “long road”: “I should have slept long and happily on election night 1963. But I did not.” (III, 333, 84) There was too much to think about: health plans, pension plans, the Quiet Revolution, federalism, and a new flag. Looking back, it is amazing

to consider what his minority governments accomplished in just five years.

What made Pearson a great prime minister? His ability to read the future, especially on the subject of Quebec and national unity. Growing up and coming of age in small-town Ontario meant that “Quebec was virtually a foreign part which we read about in terms of Madeleine de Verchères and the Battle of the Plains of Abraham.” (I, 15) But as a civil servant, cabinet minister, party leader, and prime minister, he outgrew his stereotypical understanding of Quebec and came to realize that the country needed to change in order to accommodate the urgency of the Quiet Revolution. The opting-out formula went a long way. So too did the new flag. He was even prepared to make Canada a republic if that was the price of Confederation, once broaching the subject with “Her Majesty and her three corgis” during a private meeting at Buckingham Palace. (III, 301) It’s too bad the republican option wasn’t realized because Canada continues to endure the constitutional absurdity of a foreign head of state and the indignity of watching otherwise rational people become light-headed servile toadies during royal visits. Still, Pearson’s inchoate republicanism was a measure of how far he had travelled from the Aurora train station where, perched on his dad’s shoulders, he welcomed the Duke

and Duchess of York in a “great display of imperial patriotism.” (I, 11)

Pearson also understood the importance of recognizing and advancing the political careers of French Canadians, including a young Jean Chrétien, “the son of a factory machinist from French-speaking, Roman Catholic Quebec.” (I, v) Warm and generous, Chrétien’s foreword includes a handful of anecdotes about Pearson and his personal charm. Whatever. It’s too bad Chrétien wasn’t pushed, or if he was that he ignored it, because his foreword represents a missed opportunity for a former prime minister to reflect on Pearsonianism and how it shaped or didn’t shape his foreign policy agenda. Likewise, it represents a missed chance for the man who led the country during its near-death experience in 1995 to think about Pearson’s answers to questions of Quebec’s constitutional status and, again, how they shaped or didn’t shape his answers to similar questions.

“I Like Mike” was a common election slogan. Indeed, it’s still hard not to like the guy, making his memoirs a real treat and confirming why Donald Creighton’s “giggling bow-tied bastard” got my vote for Canada’s greatest prime minister in the *Maclean’s* survey.

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Separate Beds: A History of Indian Hospitals in Canada, 1920s-1980s

by Maureen K. Lux

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016. 273 pages. \$32.95 paper ISBN 9781442613867,

\$65.00 cloth ISBN 9781442645578, \$32.95 ebook (EPUB format) ISBN 9781442663121.

The recent release of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s final report documents the history and legacy of residential schools and recommends

‘94 Calls to Action’. I would suggest that it came as no surprise to experts within the field of Indigenous history that many of those calls to action highlighted the