

# The Art of the Memoir

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were not enough; as Craig Brown points out sensibly, “they had to use their political power to protect and defend them.” Borden had never known, and perhaps never would know, what it was like to be part of a linguistic minority passionately committed to preserving their language and their institutions. Borden read French literature, and probably spoke some French (I do not know how well); but that professorial, one might almost say Presbyterian mind of his did not translate French literature of the 19th century into French-Canadian politics of the 20th. Like Woodrow Wilson before the brilliance of Clemenceau, Borden was almost naive in dealing with the sometimes brilliant products of the *collèges classiques*, of *la civilisation française*, to say nothing of the Norman shrewdness of the ordinary French-Canadian voter.

All of this Craig Brown says with candour and honesty. His book is, indeed, a model of inductive history, written always with an eye to evidence, allowing the portrait of Borden to emerge almost by contrast, by sketching in the politics in which Borden moved, the world in which he lived, rather than, as Lytton Strachey would have done, setting out a clear and misleading portrait going from premise to deduction. Such a book as Craig Brown’s is difficult to do, and the rewards in its creation must be indirect; one wonders, indeed, whether Craig Brown’s enjoyment of Borden has survived such an exhausting test. One almost suspects not. But for the answer to this, one must await, with some impatience, his Volume II.

P. B. WAITE

### The Art of the Memoir

The autobiography is the rational man’s solution to the question of life after death and for two thousand years the libraries of the civilized world have been stocked with memoirs providing a verbal extension of their authors’ presence into the afterworld. Yet the memoir, as opposed to the biography, has not been a favoured form of Canadian literary endeavour. The twentieth century has been particularly barren in this regard. Only two of our prime ministers, Tupper and Borden, wrote theirs, although Mackenzie King kept a wary and paternal eye on the efforts of his various eulogists. Around 1970, however, the dam of reticence broke, and the result has been a veritable flood of self-examination, self-justification and, less frequently, self-analysis. Since typically, if not essentially, the autobiography is a recognized form of special pleading, its author’s literary tombstone, it is no surprise to find that the books considered here usually cast a kindly eye on their respective heroes.

Lester Pearson’s autobiography, *Mike*, has appeared in regular install-

ments since 1972.<sup>1</sup> Now complete in three volumes, covering Pearson's life as a civil servant, as minister of external affairs, and finally as leader of the Liberal party and prime minister, the book has enjoyed unusual success with the public. This is largely due to the quality of the first volume, the only one to be completed before Pearson's death in December, 1972. Pearson approached the writing of his memoirs in a systematic fashion, employing research assistants who served up memoranda which were then transmuted into the final product. The result was a breezy and cheerful account of a hectic and more than usually successful career which took Pearson from rural Ontario to the capitals of the world. Readers of *Mike*, at least its first volume, have been reminded of the cheerful politician-statesman, who refused to take himself too seriously in public, whose bow tie symbolized his war on the traditional stuffiness of his profession. Pearson has written an economical account of his career, one which informs as it entertains, and in an age of indigestible jargon it is refreshing to turn to a book which reveals its author as an able stylist. But the real charm of the book lies in its anecdotes about the University of Toronto, the First World War, Oxford, Ottawa in the thirties, Europe on the eve of war, wartime Washington and London. Each is epitomized in its appropriate anecdote. The overall effect is like spending an evening in front of a fire with a genial and convivial host. And, no doubt, that is the effect intended.

The last two volumes are less entertaining. In a fragmentary state on Pearson's death, they were assembled by John Munro and Alex Inglis into roughly chronological narratives. The result is something between an autobiography and a document book. Since the editors and literary executors excluded non-Pearsonian material, and apparently kept continuity to a minimum, the reader sometimes finds himself adrift. But this defect is counterbalanced by the inclusion of great swatches of "raw" data, and this before the workings of the government's thirty-year rule has allowed us to peek at the original documents in the archives. For all their charm and their interest, however, the Pearson memoirs remain a guarded document. The nuances of Pearson's friendships, his relations with his fellow-diplomats, and even his relations with his cabinet are largely unstated. Because of this curious lack *Mike* remains two-dimensional, a monument to Pearson's discretion as well as his sense of public relations.

The undisputed focus of Pearson's memoirs is the man himself, and their principal defect is their reticence about others. This is not the case with Jack Pickersgill's *My Years with Louis St. Laurent*.<sup>2</sup> Pickersgill, like Pearson,

- 1 Lester B. Pearson, *Mike, The Memoirs of the Rt. Hon. Lester B. Pearson* (3 vols., Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1972, 1973, 1975).
- 2 J. W. Pickersgill, *My Years with Louis St. Laurent, A Political Memoir* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1975).

trained and practised as a professional historian. Like Pearson, he gave up his academic career for the department of external affairs, and his early Conservative beliefs for a commitment to Liberalism. Pickersgill ever since has preached his new cause with the fervour of the converted, and this characteristic is not lacking in his new memoir. Pickersgill is not the centre-piece of his own book. Rather, he concentrates on his political master, Louis St. Laurent, whom he served as a civil servant and then as a minister. The tone of the book is set by the frontispiece, showing St. Laurent shaking hands with Pickersgill in front of a portrait of Mackenzie King, who is peering at the two with every appearance of intense interest. No-one could expect a book that starts off with such a visual credit (in this case a picture may be worth ten thousand words) to be unbiased, but it is refreshingly candid and cheerful in its opinions. As a book, and as a fragment of history, it is more informative than Pearson's, although it makes less absorbing reading.

What most readers will find remarkable is the book's depiction of Pickersgill's life as a civil servant in close contact with politicians — particularly the master of the craft, Mackenzie King. Defining the line between proper and improper activity for civil servants has been a continuously popular Canadian indoor sport ever since the first whisper of civil service reform was heard in the land. It is doubtful if a more practical definition of the distinction was ever given than O. D. Skelton's, when Pickersgill asked his bureaucratic chief what he should do with the obviously political duties the prime minister was expecting him to perform. "Skelton assured me," Pickersgill wrote, "that while I was in the Prime Minister's office it was my duty to do what the Prime Minister wanted me to do, so long as it did not involve making public speeches or statements on my own" (p. 10). So Pickersgill became for Mackenzie King and Louis St. Laurent what Loring Christie had once been for Sir Robert Borden: the man who could, and did, proffer advice on any problem put to him, and who could anticipate the political as well as the administrative consequences of his advice. When Pickersgill arrived in Ottawa in 1937, King's last government was already two years old. Sixteen years later, Pickersgill had reached the highest echelon of the civil service as secretary of the cabinet. Many of the men he saw around the table were old friends, or in any case people with whom he had had daily contact for years. On 12 June 1953, Pickersgill attended the cabinet in the morning as its secretary. "Just before lunch" St. Laurent took him to Rideau Hall to be sworn in as a minister; and in the afternoon he returned to the cabinet in his new capacity. It was, in effect, a demotion: "I was soon to learn that a junior minister at the foot of the table had much less influence than the Secretary to the Cabinet sitting at the head of the table between St. Laurent and C. D. Howe" (p. 185).

Memoirs steer a narrow and difficult course between a concentration on their author and a possibly diffuse account of the events in which he partici-

pated. The first option, in its extreme form, becomes a personality cult with its subject as high priest; the second risks a meandering narrative with a thin reed-like personality as the connecting link between otherwise self-sufficient chapters. Pearson's memoirs are a moderate example of the first option; Pickersgill, whose personality is too strong to be lost or hidden even in chapters on "Wheat" or "The Constitution", prefers the second. The result is marginally less stimulating, but for historical purposes more valuable. One's only regret is that Pickersgill did not go further, as he might have, to include some direct quotations from the period, instead of homogenizing his material into a direct first-person narrative.

Pearson and Pickersgill have an automatic advantage in their reminiscences, since their perspective is that of the government party, freighted with superannuated state secrets and records of weighty decisions. But the opposition has not gone unrepresented or unrewarded. Last fall the first volume of John Diefenbaker's memoirs, *One Canada*, hit the stands with a sententious rumble.<sup>3</sup> The book, which deals with the period from 1895 to Diefenbaker's accession to the leadership of his party in 1956, reads like an elongated version of Diefenbaker's speeches; and those who admire the undisputed qualities of Diefenbaker's oratory will not be disappointed.

Diefenbaker labours under the handicap of belonging to a party perpetually in opposition in this period — a period in which, by all accounts, he was often at odds with his own Conservative party colleagues. He was, nevertheless, a leading figure in Canadian Conservatism almost from the moment of his election to the House of Commons in 1940, a heavyweight in debates, and the scourge of an occasionally unprepared ministerial bench. It is to this side of his career that his book does scant justice. Indeed, the problems of the book are the reverse of its merits. It has a remarkable "oral" quality which makes it easy for the reader to imagine Dief declaiming the pallid words on the page, but the narrative rambles, meanders and backtracks until one is befuddled by an interminable succession of apparently unconnected anecdotes. Some of these evoke charming memories of the House of Commons as Diefenbaker saw it: Ian Mackenzie, minister of pensions and national health, idling away the hours of boring debate by writing doggerel to send around the floor; Mackenzie King snubbing Jimmy Sinclair; Alphonse Fournier's deflation in debate. But while these flashes of wit and humour shine, they do not compensate for deficiencies in continuity, vast omissions and overstatements of the author's role or actions in the distant past. For example, the most intriguing reconstruction of the past occurs in Diefenbaker's account of his opposition to the deportation of the Japanese, foreign and Canadian-born, from coastal British Columbia in 1942. "The course that was taken against Japanese

3 John Diefenbaker, *One Canada, Memoirs of the Right Honourable John G. Diefenbaker: The Crusading Years 1895 to 1956* (Toronto, Macmillan, 1975).

Canadians," Diefenbaker correctly observes, "was wrong." He adds: "I said it over and over again" (p. 223). But not, according to Hansard, in parliament during the war.

It is difficult not to predict a short shelf-life for this book. Bought by many thousands of Canadians, it undoubtedly adds to its author's enjoyment of his later years. It has been enjoyed by thousands who remember Dief with affection or curiosity and who crave their history served up in small justificatory bites. But it will not stand as a showpiece of the limited art of the memoir.

The biography of Tommy Douglas, former premier of Saskatchewan and leader of the NDP, is in a different category.<sup>4</sup> Douglas himself has not had occasion to draft his own book, and so Mrs. Doris Shackleton has done it for him. The result is decidedly mixed. The most attractive aspect of Mrs. Shackleton's production is her obvious affection for her subject. It is not that Douglas emerges as a man without flaw or sin; he admits to personal defects, impatience, anger, as well as a political blind spot where Quebec was concerned. But she supports him warmly and it is impossible to emerge from a reading of the book without a glimpse at what made Douglas so beloved by his thousands of followers across Canada. Nonetheless, this is a book that would have benefitted from a more careful job of editing. Chubby Power, inevitably, emerges as Chubby Powers, a mistake common enough among his contemporaries but one which could have been avoided by reference to the *Parliamentary Guide* (pp. 95, 213, 332). Mackenzie King has acquired a brother "Bruce" (the real one was named Max) (p. 95); C. D. Howe has become minister of munitions and supply a year before the department existed; the Bren gun scandal occurs in Mrs. Shackleton's pages in 1939, rather than 1938 (p. 111). One might add that the account of the removal of Ian MacKenzie as defence minister is also wrong; it occurred only after war was declared, and he was superseded by Norman Rogers, not J. L. Ralston (p. 111). But perhaps this is a minor symptom of a major flaw, for among the CCFers and occasional Conservatives interviewed for the book there is not one Liberal. Apparently detestation for the camp of the enemy runs so deep that it was not considered worthwhile even checking his dispositions. This, then, is a book that is true to life, but not necessarily to the facts.

For a non-initiate, the most interesting aspect of the Douglas biography is its detailing of the clashes of personality and performance between Douglas and the Lewises, father and son. The story of Stephen flying out to British Columbia to beg Douglas to resign in favour of his father is surely without parallel in Canadian history, at least since the days of Tupper père et fils. *Tommy Douglas* is essential reading for those who wish to understand the man; but it has to be supplemented if one intends to move on to his times.

4 Doris French Shackleton, *Tommy Douglas* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1975).

The last item in this cornucopia of biography is neither fish nor fowl, neither memoir nor authorized version, but a collection of snippets of interviews with politicians by the journalist Peter Stursberg.<sup>5</sup> *Diefenbaker: Leadership Gained* was originally intended to centre around a set of interviews with the Chief himself, but when Diefenbaker's own autobiography began to loom these interviews had to be dropped. We are left with a portrait of a political period in which Diefenbaker, the main actor, remains offstage. Although Stursberg's book is unusual in Canada, it is one of a type becoming more and more common outside: Merle Miller's collections of Truman tapes and Studs Terkel's book come to mind. It is gratifying to report that Stursberg's book succeeds very well in recreating the atmosphere of Diefenbaker's heyday, with contributions from friends, former friends, and outright opponents. Some of the incidents described are downright astonishing: Ellen Fairclough, Canada's first woman cabinet minister, being sent from the room because her male colleagues are discussing a rape-murder case (pp. 185-6). During an election, Pierre Sévigny dupes Diefenbaker into giving an unwitting testimonial to Maurice Duplessis, with the happy result that Chef supported Chief in the campaign (pp. 54-8).

The politicians and the members of their entourage are banal, intriguing, reflective and often extremely perceptive — more so, on the average, than those who reported them. Particularly outstanding is the interview with Merrill Menzies (pp. 107-10) which provides an impressive overview of the policies of the St. Laurent Liberals from one who admired them even while he could not condone them. There are a few minor flaws in the book: W. O. Bennett is really W. J.; the resignations of Sharp, McIvor and Bennett had little in common except coincidence (p. 148); and Social Credit in 1962 won some of its Quebec seats from the Liberals as well as the Conservatives (p. 271). In general, however, the book sets very high scholarly standards, a welcome harbinger for future examples of the genre.

It would be idle to argue that the books reviewed here will be regarded as literary masterpieces or as timeless examples of historical writing. For historians whose sensibilities are blunted by archival dust it is difficult to regard memoirs as much more than meat for the eventual grinder, and some of these works are precisely that: Pearson's last two volumes for the diplomatic historian; Diefenbaker's anecdotes for future Conservative prime ministers; Pickersgill and Stursberg for the professionals.

ROBERT BOTHWELL

5 Peter Stursberg, *Diefenbaker: Leadership Gained* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1975).