

Book Reviews

For Most Conspicuous Bravery: A Biography of Major-General George R. Pearkes, V.C., Through Two World Wars, by Reginald H. Roy. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1977. Pp. xiv, 388; \$15.95.

Who could deny the difficulties involved in writing a biography of a living and much admired public figure? How does the biographer reconcile the demands of his craft for scholarly objectivity with his admiration for and familiarity with his subject? How can the problem of source material be overcome, whether it is too much or too little? A difficult task indeed it is to tread the line between hatchet job and paeans of praise, and one must wonder just why it is that biography remains one of the most popular forms of scholarship.

These questions interest me in particular because I am a failed biographer. Half a dozen years ago I set out to write a biography of Mackenzie King during the Second World War, an intention that I retained until I had done drafts on most of the period and realized that I had a political study of King's administration and not a biography of that difficult, fascinating character. I think I can recognize the difficulties that others face.

Professor Roy faced in particular the problem of sources. For most of his subject's varied career, there is very little available. There are no rich files of Pearkes papers, crammed with letters, memos, reports and articles; all were destroyed or never existed. How then can one proceed? Roy opted for an extensive series of oral history interviews with Pearkes, his friends, colleagues and acquaintances, and relied on correspondence with others who dealt with the General. He used the military records in the Public Archives of Canada and in the Directorate of History of the Department of National Defence, and a few collections of manuscripts. His major source for Pearkes' career as Minister of National Defence is the Douglas Harkness Papers, apparently a collection of both Pearkes' and his suc-

cessor's ministerial files. Other collections were closed to him, particularly those of John Diefenbaker. As a result, much rests on oral sources.

Is this adequate or necessary? Oral history is very "in" these days, as the popularity of the Broadfoot and Stursberg volumes attests. But oral history is based on the memories of individuals with axes to grind, things to forget, alter, bowdlerize or even remember accurately. It is by definition a haphazard and chancy procedure that should only be used with care. As a skilled historian Roy is clearly aware of the difficulties, but he has nonetheless been forced to rely on oral sources perhaps to the detriment of his book. And, curiously, much of the oral material he presents is banal — so commonplace that one often wonders why it is included.

The question of manuscript sources is also puzzling. Professor Roy has, for example, used the King Papers and Diaries for the war but he has only a handful of citations from this rich collection. There are relatively few citations from the Ralston Papers, those of the Minister of National Defence for most of the war years, and none at all from the papers of Angus Macdonald and Chubby Power, Ralston's war associates. There is nothing from the Conservative party's records, nothing from the files left by Graydon, Bracken, Hanson, Meighen, Bruce, Macdonnell, Bell and other Conservative figures. There is nothing from wartime cabinet ministers such as Crerar, Claxton and Howe. There is nothing from senior civil servants such as Pearson.

Does this matter? I think it does. It matters first because no historical study can be complete unless all the sources have been canvassed, even the less obvious ones. It matters as well because of the paucity of Pearkes' material in his own records. And it matters because there is occasionally useful material in out of the way places. To cite only one example, in the Pearson Papers in Ottawa there is a letter from General H. D. G. Crerar to Pearson dated 25 April 1942. Crerar had taken over command of Pearkes' division overseas and replaced him as temporary corps commander as well. Pearkes, Crerar wrote to his friend Pearson, was a forceful leader and able trainer, but a man of limited scope who would be better as a battalion commander than a brigadier or better as a brigadier than a division commander. He was a man of limited vision, Crerar said; a man who could see only one thing at a time; a man with no interest in long-term plans; a first-class fighting soldier who would handle his men with determination but who might produce negative results.

Now this is only one letter by one man. Some of the criticism and the reasons for it are countered by Roy's biography, and countered very well indeed. But this letter should have been cited in the book and directly

dealt with — and countered — in the text. A thorough search of all the available manuscripts would have turned up this letter, and others.

It follows too that the weaknesses in the archival research are reflected in the lack of context in the book. Roy is very good indeed when he treats Pearkes' role as a soldier. He understands the military and he likes to write about the two world wars, and he does this well. His sources on the military side, as I suggested above, are quite complete and well mined. But on the political context, particularly in the period when Pearkes was commanding in British Columbia and when he was in opposition and government in Ottawa, the context seems weak. Conscription, for example, is a contentious issue on which many points of view are possible. But we must, at the least, try to understand not only Pearkes' motivation and attitudes to this subject but also those of the Prime Minister, his cabinet, General McNaughton, and French-Canadians. Roy does treat the subject but his prose is flat and he suggests (to me, at least) that he really understands only Pearkes' position at this time. But then he is the biographer of Pearkes, and I am a failed biographer of King, unquestionably affected both by my interest in King and by my failure.

Roy has a freer field in his writing on Pearkes' political career. But I found this section disappointing too, primarily because we never get a full view of Pearkes' role in Ottawa and his influence or lack of it. Certainly the General must have been close to Diefenbaker, and certainly Diefenbaker was a storm centre throughout George Drew's tenure of office as party leader. But we get little on any party questions. Nor, once Pearkes becomes Minister of National Defence under Diefenbaker, do we get much that is new on defence policy. Pearkes had stepped down before the rot set in and before the nuclear crisis destroyed the Conservative government, so perhaps this is simply an unfortunate bit of chronology for Professor Roy (although certainly it was Pearkes' good luck to have gone to his reward in B.C. before the deluge).

Thus one can say of this book that it is very well done on the military aspects of Pearkes' career, and particularly so on the Great War period. George Pearkes was a fighting soldier of enormous distinction and incredible courage, the kind of officer who inspires awe in his subordinates and superiors both. He was a brave man whose story is well worth the telling (and reading), and he will undoubtedly be pleased by Professor Roy's biography of him.