

## Book Reviews

*W. A. C. Bennett and the Rise of British Columbia*, by David J. Mitchell. Vancouver and Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1983. Pp. ix, 464.

David Mitchell is the biographer W. A. C. Bennett deserved. Mitchell called upon Bennett in 1976 hoping to extract some material for an article from the retired and somewhat resentful former Premier. Bennett, who Mitchell describes as one who always had to have his way, drew him into a series of interviews and managed to demolish Mitchell's image of him as a "ten foot ogre." With the publication of this book, Bennett posthumously has got his way once again. No student of post-1945 Canadian history can ignore this book or its subject, although both the book and its subject will make most readers uncomfortable.

The book's flaws are numerous. Typographical errors abound, as do pretentious quotations and allusions, and the author's copy of *Bartlett's Quotations* must be badly worn. The research is extensive but uneven. Mitchell has conducted an extraordinary number of interviews and has done so skilfully. Nevertheless, his use of secondary works and primary sources beyond British Columbia is negligible. The biography relies mainly upon the interviews with Bennett and his colleagues. The distance between biographer and subject is exceedingly small, and the tone is excessively chatty and sententious. By the end of the book, the reader knows that the subject has captured the biographer, and the mediation which the skilled biographer offers both to subject and reader thoroughly breaks down.

Despite these flaws, this book does reveal a great deal about Bennett and is most valuable as an historical quarry. The portrait which emerges is not what Bennett would have relished nor what Mitchell had hoped to sketch. Devoid of ideals and fearful of ideas, Bennett's politics seem to have had little purpose apart from his drive for power. What did Bennett believe beyond the simplicities of "It Couldn't Be Done," a poem he recited throughout his life which celebrated action without

meaning and whose triteness would have embarrassed Samuel Smiles? Very little, it seems. Mitchell, for example, claims that Bennett valued "loyalty" highly and that he often said: "If you expect loyalty, you must give loyalty." But to whom was Bennett loyal? Certainly not to his coalition colleagues, not to the Conservative Party, and not to Social Credit ideals. Mitchell suggests that personal loyalty was "important" to Bennett in discussing the Robert Sommers scandal. Yet one paragraph earlier (p. 253), Mitchell argues that Bennett's "incredible" escape from the Sommers scandal was accomplished through the deflection of "any criticism over the manner in which the case was handled in the direction of the attorney general." Loyalty, it would seem, took unusual forms. This is also true in the case of Bennett's ancestors and his heirs. He claimed he was of UEL background although he was not. W. A. C. seems to have been jealous of his son Bill Bennett's political success. He spent his sad last years being "extremely critical" of his son's government, surrounded by "cronies and a variety of hangers-on" but without friends whose intimacy he had never wanted or needed. Power was enough; seemingly it was all.

Mitchell does establish that Bennett was an able financial administrator and that he had extraordinary political intuition. He is not so convincing when he implicitly argues that the "rise" of British Columbia was largely a Bennett accomplishment. What Bennett's leadership did affect was the relationship of British Columbia politics, society and economy to the rest of Canada. In the 1940s the linkages between British Columbian business, political and bureaucratic élites and those on the other side of the Rockies were remarkably strong. In the following decades these linkages have become attenuated. Many factors, of course, influenced this development, but Bennett's tendency to stand outside and, indeed, distrust traditional elites and behaviour is certainly most important. Bennett's purposes are unclear; his influence is not.

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*The Reins of Power: Governing British Columbia*, by J. Terrence Morley, Norman J. Ruff, Neil A. Swainson, R. Jeremy Wilson and Walter D. Young. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1983. Pp. x, 342.

It seemed a good idea at the time — to probe social democracy in power, to study the rapid turnover in government of the Social Credit