

*Mayor Gerry: The Remarkable Gerald Grattan McGeer*, by David Ricardo Williams. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1986. Pp. 319; illus.

A major history of Vancouver noted that “except for a few contemporary magazine and newspaper articles there are, for example, no biographical studies of such colourful mayors as L. D. Taylor or G. G. McGeer. . . .”<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein, a recent review of Canadian urban studies noted that in terms of urban politics and governance, the task of specifying what is unique and what is commonplace about Canadian politics at the municipal level has just begun.<sup>2</sup> For these reasons — and because of McGeer’s national and international prominence — this biography is a welcome addition to Canadiana. Unfortunately, this volume has many flaws; while it is a “good read,” it does not advance our conceptual knowledge of Canadian public affairs — and especially urban politics — to the extent that might have been reasonably expected.

There is no doubt that “The Remarkable Gerald Grattan McGeer” was an important Canadian public figure. Born in Winnipeg in 1888, McGeer’s family moved to British Columbia in 1890 and “Gerry” was to spend the rest of his life on the west coast. Called to the bar in 1915, McGeer served two terms in the B.C. Legislature (1916-1920, 1933-1934), ten years as a Member of Parliament (1935-1945), and two years as a Senator (1945-1947). The flamboyant politician was best known, however, for his two terms as mayor of Vancouver, serving in 1935-1936, and elected again in 1947, only to die in office. In between — and often during — his service as a politician, McGeer practised as a lawyer and, among other achievements, triumphed as B.C. government counsel during the historic freight rate cases of the 1920s. And, interestingly, he corresponded regularly with Mackenzie King. In short, his was a “remarkable” career.

Williams’ *Mayor Gerry* provides a full and fascinating account of the life of this erratic and paradoxical figure. In the process, the author has uncovered a good deal of new material culled from a variety of primary sources — personal papers, diaries, correspondence, and documents. Students of Vancouver, British Columbia, and Canada itself will find something of use in this well-written volume.

<sup>1</sup> Patricia E. Roy, *Vancouver: An Illustrated History*, The History of Canadian Cities Series (Toronto: James Lorimer and National Museum of Man, 1980), 184.

<sup>2</sup> Alan F. J. Artibise and Paul-André Linteau, *The Evolution of Urban Canada: An Analysis of Approaches and Interpretations* (Winnipeg: Institute of Urban Studies, 1984), 28.

For all its strengths, however, this biography fails to advance our interpretative knowledge of Canadian public life beyond the personality stage; an aspect of this study that is especially frustrating in terms of Vancouver municipal politics. To be sure, we learn much about McGeer and his day-to-day activities as mayor during a critical period in Vancouver's history. But Williams rarely goes beyond the "life" of McGeer to recount and analyze the "times" in which "Mayor Gerry" lived. Thus, for example, we learn virtually nothing about such critical issues as the decline of municipal autonomy in the 1920s and 1930s, a theme that deserves substantial attention in the career of a politician that served at all three levels of government. It is notable that this theme has been addressed at the national level by John Taylor and others;<sup>3</sup> what would have been most welcome here was a "fleshing out" of this national theme at the level of a particular — and particularly important — city. Williams, in short, has missed an opportunity to test several hypotheses regarding patterns of municipal politics and the federal-provincial-municipal relationship. Similarly, Williams virtually ignores the rich and rapidly growing secondary literature on Vancouver itself, content to allow the McGeer personality full sway in determining themes, issues, and questions. This approach to biography has, perhaps, its place. But readers who wish to utilize this study as a means of understanding broader issues will be disappointed, at least in the case of urban studies. In terms of other themes — and there are many — the same, I suspect, is true.

In general, then, *Mayor Gerry* is both a success and a failure, much like McGeer himself. Williams has prepared an interesting biography of a generous, visionary, colourful, bigoted, and impulsive individual; a Vancouverite who gave the city and the province a prominence it had never before enjoyed. The biographer has not, however, sustained the portrait of the man in the context in which McGeer lived and worked. In this respect, the volume is shallow and parochial; it fails to utilize and/or appreciate the widely available secondary material that exists on the inter-war years and, in so doing, falls far short of the potential that is promised by a combination of in-depth primary and secondary research. The result is a biography that is at once both entertaining and sciolistic.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-28.