

Book Reviews

Lord of Point Grey: Larry MacKenzie of UBC, by P. B. Waite. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987. Pp. xi, 256; 33 b/w photographs. \$21.95.

The goddess of good fortune who smiled on N. A. M. (Larry) MacKenzie's long life and distinguished career stayed with him to the end. She obviously blessed the choice of his biographer, whose work appeared just one year after his death in 1986. Peter B. Waite, a leading historian of the old school, and a prolific contributor to Canadian history — including several standard accounts of Canada in the immediate post-Confederation decades and biographies of Sir John A. Macdonald and Sir John Thompson — was the ideal choice. He brought a judicious empathy to the portrayal of Larry MacKenzie and the many worlds he inhabited from his Nova Scotian birth in 1894 to his last Vancouver years in the 1980s.

MacKenzie was a doer, little interested in ideas for their own sake, in spite of post-graduate work at Harvard and Cambridge, England, following his Dalhousie LL.B. in 1923. His charm and social skills, along with his prodigious capacity for work, were servants of an ambition that relentlessly drove him to the end. His career ranged from work as a legal adviser at the International Labour Office in Geneva, to the teaching of law at the University of Toronto, to the presidency of the University of New Brunswick (1940-44) and of the University of British Columbia (1944-62), to a brief stint as Senator. Along the way he was involved; usually in some leading role, in an unending succession of provincial, Canadian, North American and international organizations. From the forties onward he collected honorary degrees and other awards with a gusto that was stimulated rather than diminished by the frequency with which they were offered.

Like MacKenzie, Peter Waite is gregarious, fascinated by character, and, also like his subject, disinclined to see the world in terms of classes or social forces. His *Lord of Point Grey* is an attempt to get behind the

strong, rough-hewn features and the extraordinary charm that MacKenzie lavished on waitresses and queens, on gardeners and Prime Ministers, to find MacKenzie the man. He succeeds in the sense that by the end of the book the reader has been drawn into MacKenzie's world — a world of individuals, events, goals and the hurdles that stood in their way, a flesh and blood world that contained "few abstractions" (p. 159), in which groups and collectivities could be reduced to their individual members, and in which "drinks and talk" (p. 168) could resolve most issues. MacKenzie's personality, his mannerisms, his way of speaking, writing, thinking, talking, eating, drinking, walking, and working are all given life in these pages.

Since MacKenzie was a man of action, for whom Hamlet's indecisions would have inspired a mixture of contempt and impatience, the portrayal of his busyness, of his immersion in good works at the many meeting points of university and nation, effectively capture much of a man who lived in public. With his deft ability to sketch scenes and contexts, his occasionally baroque language, his taste for physical description — MacKenzie "was rather a bear of a man; he was not graceful; he had a lumbering way of walking as if for too long he had had an axe on one shoulder and a log on the other" (p. 158) — and his measured assessment of MacKenzie's character, Peter Waite goes a long way to making sense of *le chef* who paved the way for the modern University of British Columbia.

At the end, the reader, like the author, knows MacKenzie the public man, but is left with a question mark about the private man. What drove him remains elusive. There was a core of privacy at the centre of his existence that his wife Margaret did not penetrate and that the biographer's probes skirt around. The part of himself that MacKenzie hid from others, he also suppressed from his own consciousness. In a typically masculine manner, MacKenzie reacted to a love affair in Geneva that did not end in the marriage he passionately wanted, by "batten[ing] the hatches down," and forging ahead, finding solace in mastery of the world of men and events (p. 63).

Polly, the woman he loved in Geneva, and who corresponded with him for over fifty years, told him a year and a half after their first meeting: "I really know less about your mind than any man's I know. I honestly couldn't give you a judgement on it" (p. 61). To Margaret, his wife, the inner sanctuary of his being was inaccessible, a private preserve (p. 67). In the last paragraph of this subtle exploration of a complex personality that only seemed simple, Peter Waite reports his inability to find what the ideas were that drove his subject. MacKenzie answered "none" when

asked what books had influenced him. He was puzzled by the related question of the philosophical influences on his life, "not really believing the proposition that ideas could have much to do with shaping a man's career. He looked at me with those bright, magnetic eyes, and his slow, worldly smile. 'Life made me,' said he finally" (p. 225).

Peter Waite's biography confirms that a great university president may have a deficient capacity for introspection, and may even share in a certain distaste for purely scholarly concerns that is typical of men of affairs. For the *Lord of Point Grey*, an interest in the past was an avoidable irrelevance. Poetry, music, and philosophy were also marginal to his intellectual and aesthetic existence.

Peter Waite brought humane sympathy, literary skills, and rigorous scholarship to this lucid biography. He makes it difficult for the reader not to share his respect and affection for Larry MacKenzie.

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Distant Neighbours: A Comparative History of Seattle and Vancouver, by Norbert MacDonald. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987. Pp. xxii, 259; illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index.

This is an admirable piece of work, succinct, well organized and illustrated, and very readable. It is also valuable; as a scholarly, substantive account of the two large North Pacific coastal cities, but especially as a joint historical analysis of Seattle and Vancouver: major cities close in location and environmental conditions, yet "distant neighbours" nevertheless in many aspects of their community development. The fact as well that Professor MacDonald skilfully interweaves their distinct records of experience, balancing the two and examining their similarities or differences with care and consistency, makes his volume a considerable success in the sometimes unsatisfying field of comparative urban history.

This success, to my mind, also stems from the author's decision to do a comprehensive though solidly grounded survey of his subject cities, and not to zero in on some special themes such as social mobility or patterns of élites — which can involve imposing work in theory and quantification and yet deliver little on the city as entity, leaving intricate results that may be more tautological than instructive. Mobility, élites, class and ethnic patterns are certainly treated in the book at hand often with good substantiation in detail, such as its study of civic business leaders, notably