

HISTORIANS AND BIOGRAPHERS

THE RELATIONSHIP between history and biography is far from simple. The historian is concerned with external and collective manifestations of human existence. The biographer is largely concerned with its inner and individual manifestations. The two worlds of course are interdependent, and history that ignores the psychology of its actors is likely to be as deficient as biography that ignores the role of external events in shaping its subjects' lives. Yet the disciplines are different enough for historians not always to be good biographers, and vice versa; the eye that is attuned to the broad sweep of historical events cannot always weigh accurately the minutiae of one man's life. When that man is a public figure, the problem is inevitably compounded.

I was reminded of this when I read C. P. Stacey's *A Very Double Life*, whose second title is *The Private World of Mackenzie King*. Colonel Stacey's book cannot fail to be interesting, since it offers the first lengthy presentation of the hitherto inaccessible private diaries of Mackenzie King. Much, of course, is what one had expected. We have known for decades that King frequented seances and regarded himself as inspired by his dead mother; we have had hints of his belief in a curious kind of metempsychosis that turned his dogs into guardian spirits. (There were, significantly, no spirit cats in his world.) But it is still strange and interesting to read King's own words, almost to hear that eerie voice, talking not only of insubstantial spirits but also of the notably substantial ladies with whom he sustained apparently platonic attachments and the less-than-ladies whom he attempted to rescue from prostitution while, according to Stacey's reading of the diaries, sinfully enjoying them.

Much of Stacey's reading, in fact, is highly conjectural. When King goes out on "strolls" and returns with the thought of having wasted his time sinfully, it is carrying matters far to assume that he had really been involved in fleshly

commerce with prostitutes, a sin to which he never in fact confesses. Given King's defensive nature, the thought of his taking a physical initiative with a prostitute seems completely out of character; far more plausible is the idea of his having wandered about on a summer's evening to look at the girls and lust after them and then return to the guilty enjoyment of what his generation called "the solitary vice".

The pushing of conjecture to extremity, thus presenting King's life in harsh contrasts, is extended in Colonel Stacey's book into other areas than the sexual, and with equally questionable results. Was there really such a division as Stacey suggests between the man who consulted the spirits and the man who framed high policy? Were King's political decisions in fact unaffected by the "insights" which other men regarded as superstitions? Certainly he looked for political reassurance to the spirits, and found numerological significance in the times and dates of events; is it likely that he did not on occasion conceive it possible to use such means to the actual influencing of events? Once private fantasy takes hold of a mind, there is no logical limit to its manifestations.

It seems to me that Colonel Stacey has in fact been writing biography as a historian, accustomed to the chiaroscuro of history, whose high lights and deep shadows contrast so sharply with the degrees of half-light in which individual lives are mostly lived. One might even, to turn one of Stacey's methods against him, conjecture a little on the extent to which the fact of his being specifically a *military* historian has led him to see individual lives as patterns of opposed and warring forces, with the public pursuit of virtue opposed to the private following of vice, and the "real" world of politics opposed to the "unreal" world of psychic phenomena. A military historian, accustomed to dealing with events in their most concrete forms, might also be led to assume that acts must be physical — as crimes are — to qualify as sin, whereas in fact the most torturing sins are those of the mind.

To suggest that the historian cannot be a biographer — or vice versa — is far from the intent of the historian-biographer who writes these lines. In the face of such a splendid historian's biography as Margaret Prang's recent life of Rowell, it would be absurd to insist. Nevertheless, there are limiting elements in the craft of history to which the writer must be sensitive when he moves from narrating events to examining the individuals out of whose actions these events arise. What has happened is never ambiguous; the motives of those who precipitate happenings always are, and the biographer must steep himself in the shadows that would only blind the historian. In the process he discovers that there is no such thing in reality as a "double life". All lives are unities, and Mackenzie King's private superstitions permeated his public life as surely as Hitler's mania shaped the collective life of all Europe in his time and in ours too.

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