

Robert Laird Borden---His Memoirs

By A. R. M. LOWER

THE publication of the memoirs of a Prime Minister is always an important event, and if the Prime Minister has held office at a crucial period, the event becomes doubly important. It was Sir Robert Borden's fate to have been at the head of the government of Canada during an era of tremendous moment for humanity, and therefore anything that he himself set down in writing must be vested with peculiar significance.

The accounts, written by or about the heads of the government of Canada, are of uneven value for the historian. Nearly every political leader, from the days of Howe and Mackenzie on, has had some sort of biography, but while most of these books are useful in one way or another, at least as repositories of information, few are adequate studies of their subject. Many are written in an impossible literary style and are formless in arrangement, their authors showing no power to select the relevant material and reject the unimportant. Few of them contain broad and discerning judgments upon the men they have attempted to describe and the issues that confronted them. It is only since the war that there has arisen in Canada a school of history that has produced students adequate to the task of a genuine interpretation of the national experience, and as yet not much of the skill of the modern historian has gone into the writing of biography. Nevertheless, examples do exist, worthy to be ranked alongside the good biographies that abound in other countries. Thus Dr. O. D. Skelton not only gave us his classic study of one of the great figures of Confederation, Alexander Tilloch Galt, but also wrote the official Life of Sir Wilfred Laurier. Those who know this biography

know that while it is "official", it is at the same time a fair and scholarly presentation of Laurier's career. Professor Wilson's *Robert Baldwin* is another study that will hold its own. Professor Sisson's *Egerton Ryerson*, the latest addition, is lively and scholarly. Of the older books, some of the Lives in the *Makers of Canada* series are quite good; that of Lord Sydenham by the late Adam Shortt is an excellent constitutional study; Lewis's *Brown* and Longley's *Howe* are also very good. Most of the others are mediocre. Of a still older vintage is Joseph Pope's *Memoirs of Sir John A. Macdonald*, written about 1895. It is a sympathetic and readable biography of that great man, but no one would claim that it is impartial. It is, as a matter of fact, pure hero worship and there is no greater lack to-day in our historical scholarship than a new and objective life of the great "John A."

Pope's *Macdonald* is virtually the only biography written before the year 1900 that anyone to-day would read without being compelled to do so. Professional scholars have to plough through the arid wastes of such compilations as Alexander Mackenzie's *Life of George Brown*, or the still duller pages of Buckingham and Ross's *Alexander Mackenzie*, but certainly no ordinary reader would ever pick up these books for an hour's pleasant reading. They, like many another, before or since, are all dull as ditch-water, heavy and humorless—it might hardly be too strong to say with Shakespeare "flat, stale and unprofitable". But unfortunately they are more typical of the average biography or autobiography written by or about Canadians than are the books of Pope or Skelton: the good ones are few, the bad ones many.

The difficulty with nearly everyone who has written a biography in Canada—and this includes even very good

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examples of the craft, such as some of those named—is that the writer has invariably considered it his duty to eulogize. Canadian biographies have been mainly works of pious memory, literary tombstones, with the glowing epitaphs emblazoned for all to see. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*, a rather fatuous maxim after all, has been taken much too seriously to heart by our writers. Tombstones are right and proper objects, but as a rule they are not of much interest except to those who were connected with their subject, and they are certainly not the places to which one goes to get the exact truth expressed in good literary form. Quite the opposite. Canadian biography will never be a serious form of writing and will never be worth anything until it gets out of the graveyard. That is to say, the subject of the biography must be regarded as a real human being, with faults as well as virtues, a man who accomplished something, but also made mistakes. What did he mean to the world and to his country, what was his contribution, what were his strengths and weaknesses, private as well as public, what was his philosophy, what inner inspiration kept him pressing on, these are the questions that the biographer must seek to answer.

Autobiographies, such as the one under review, come under a rather different set of rules. Since the war, the presses of the world have simply vomited autobiographies. There is hardly an important figure connected with the war, by sea or by land, who has not confided his justification to the pages of an autobiography. Such books would fill not only libraries but warehouses. Most of them are forgotten as soon as they appear, and deserve to be, but some of them are astonishingly able pieces of work, books that no student of the modern world can afford to neglect. For example, there is Winston Churchill's *World Crisis*, cast in the form of a history, but strongly autobiographical, and the astonishing series of volumes (six already!) put out by Mr. Lloyd George. Mr. Lloyd George's book will rank as a masterpiece, both in literary skill, cleverness of exposition

and intrinsic interest for the historian and student of the war period. It is right at the top of this species of literature.

Nearly all autobiographies have certain features in common. They all, so to speak, put their best foot forward. Nothing else can be expected, and provided that the author does not give the impression that he was never wrong and no one else was ever right (unfortunately both the above books do give just that impression), little exception can be taken to so very human a trait. They are defences, or *apologia*, and must be taken as such. Their authors are naturally at the centre of the events they describe. Their importance must therefore as a rule be somewhat written down. Again, they are usually written by old men, men for whom the haze of memory has softened the harshnesses of the scene. They should therefore be charitable in their judgments, though regrettably, many of them are not, except upon their own authors' conduct. More likely, memory plays tricks and sometimes the other actors in the drama, if they could be heard from, would give accounts differing greatly from those supplied by the narrator.

In the ranks of the post-war autobiographical world one country is conspicuous by its almost complete absence—Canada. With the exception of Sir Robert Borden's book, there has not been a single important autobiography appear in Canada since the war. There have been hundreds in England, Germany and France, scores in the United States. Surely either this must be the most non-literary of countries, or alternatively it must have produced few first rate figures, few men whose memoirs would be of interest. There is reason for believing that both these explanations have a considerable measure of truth, and there is also another, an explanation that stares one in the face if he be acquainted with English autobiography: it is simply that in England and the United States, men do not object to speaking out, to putting information before their public. In Canada we are secretive, we think the things we know

are much more important that they really are, and we seem very much afraid of giving offence. Churchill, Haig, Siddell, Poincare, Lloyd George, and many others, simply could not have written in Canada, still less could they have found publishers, for they indulged in a species of direct, hard hitting quite foreign to Canadian life. It is perhaps not too much to say that Lloyd George revealed more official secrets in a single chapter of one of his volumes than all of our public men have revealed in Canada since the war. And few people in England thought any the worse of him for that—the war was over and done with, why should the truth not have come out? That is not the attitude in Canada.

Sir Robert Borden's book was long looked forward to as probably a significant Canadian contribution to the art of memoir writing and to the history of the war period. Of its total of over one thousand pages, 450 deal with the pre-war period of his life and ministry, the remainder with the war years. The book stops short with his resignation. There are pleasant chapters on his boyhood and his early years in Nova Scotia—they are among the best in the book. The long, ungrateful years spent as leader of the opposition occupy many pages: from them nothing emerges more clearly than that here was a true case of the position seeking the man, for on many occasions Borden, harrassed with intrigues against him from within the party, sought to resign, always to have leadership forced on him once more by men who if they did not relish him, found him indispensable. When he formed his government, his largeness of mind was singularly in evidence: acting on the principle that a leader should never allow personal likes and dislikes to interfere with the good of the cause, he took into his cabinet some of the very men who had been most bitterly opposed to him.

His three years of office before the war broke out were crowded with important events, such as the naval aid bill. All of his measures, whatever may be thought of their wisdom to-day, were inspired by sincerity and a high resolve to live

up to his principles. The friendship which he had early formed with Sir Wilfred Laurier deepened, and it is one of the encouraging things in the Canadian political scene that these two men, of such different backgrounds, while clashing constantly in public, could yet preserve private amenities and a sincere regard for each other's character. That friendship was probably one of the large factors helping to prevent the war-time split between the two races going even further than it did.

The bulk of the book is given over to the war. Apart from the organization and despatch of the first forces, large problems discussed are the question of nickel reaching the enemy (1916-17), the railway situation, conscription, the formation of the union government, the war election of 1917 and of course, the constitutional meetings and the peace conference.

Borden had to his credit vigorously opposed the lunatic railroad expansion of the early years of the century, but it was to be his fate to have the results of it laid on his doorstep. He took over the old Canadian Northern and paved the way for the formation of the Canadian National. He seems to have done his best and makes out a fair case for his actions but this is one of the points where one wishes he had spoken out more freely. The real story of the nationalizing of the Canadian Northern is yet to be written.

One of Borden's war problems was personal—the relationships between himself and his Minister of Militia, Sir Sam. Hughes. Here he does speak out. Hughes—a typical Ontario firebrand—was a neurotic nuisance, badly afflicted with megalomania. Only a man of great patience would have put up with him as long as Borden did.

The chapter dealing with the decision to impose conscription is not overly satisfactory. The author tends to stack the cards against Sir Wilfred Laurier and does not convince his readers that his judgment on the point was infallible. Quebec was alienated and Sir Wilfred knew it would be alienated. Sir Robert

failed to penetrate that situation, and as a result there occurred the most serious rift in the Canadian fabric that has occurred since Confederation. Conscription was not the only war issue that was badly handled in Quebec; while Sir Robert had nothing but the best of intentions and cherished nothing but the warmest feelings for the French-Canadians, he failed badly in the way in which he dealt with them. It is obvious from the *Memoirs* themselves that while he was one of the most reliable and sincere of men, he had little or no imagination. Hence when he got off his own beat, into unfamiliar territory, he was helpless.

The formation of the Union government, by contrast, brings this out strongly. Here in the day-to-day play of politics, seeing this man and placating that, dealing with people who whether they differed from him in views or not, were fundamentally like himself, he was at home, and despite endless discouragements, he kept on, not sparing himself, not at all worried about his own prestige, answering what to him was the clear call of duty, until eventually he succeeded. There would have been no Union government without him.

One of the astonishing things that comes out of the book is the completely subordinate part that Canada played in the war: for the first two or three years,

indeed until his visit to England in 1917, Canada was nothing more than a supply base for men and materials. It was only after the strongest language and a fairly open hint that if things did not change, Canada would have to reconsider its whole position, that Borden succeeded in altering the position to some degree. He was plainly dissatisfied with our relationship to Great Britain and it may be assumed that the constitutional changes beginning in 1917 and running through to the Peace Conference, those moves that went far to making Canada a nation, took their rise in that dissatisfaction. Certain it is that as the war progressed, Borden's psychology progressed with it. When the war began, he was a colonial, when it ended, he was a Canadian.

There is not much in the book that is entirely new. Most of it could have been pieced together from newspaper cuttings and especially from Hansard. There is not much revelation in the English style. It is an important book because it was written by an important man and especially because it is an unconscious revelation of character. It is something to know that at a critical hour Canada had at her helm, a man without personal ambition, sincere, of great honesty, sound in judgment and free from passion.