

James Eayrs

Review Article

Escott Reid: Holy Obstant

Radical Mandarin: The Memoirs of Escott Reid. Toronto, Buffalo, London: U of Toronto P, 1989. Pp. xi, 405. \$35.00.

During a career spanning more than six decades Escott Reid has been educator (at Frontier College in 1926, the Canadian Institute of International Affairs from 1932 to 1938, Dalhousie University in 1937-8, Glendon College as intrepid innovator during its early turbulent years from 1965 to 1969), international civil servant (officer of the World Bank from 1962 to 1965), and author ("Writing has since 1969 been my . . . profession"). But it is as statesman that he leaves his legacy. *Si monumentum requiris, circumspice*: the United Nations, the Commonwealth, the North Atlantic Treaty, even the ruins of Soviet empire brought low in part by NATO's long watch at its marches, all bear traces of his labors.

Reid's assessment of an American colleague—"He was intellectually arrogant but he had a good deal to be arrogant about intellectually"—applies to him exactly. He was invariably ahead of his time. In a high school oration he sees Canada exercising its right of legation, legislatively autonomous, no longer appealing to the Privy Council, patriating the constitution: "I made these proposals at the age of sixteen; I was seventy-seven before they had all been brought into effect." In 1934 he wants the League of Nations to take charge of colonies, champion equality among races, redistribute wealth; as decolonization, anti-apartheid, and "a new international economic order" these aspirations preoccupy the United Nations forty years on. In 1940 he believes the United States will enter the war: "The Far East may provide the spark." In 1947 he is the first official of any government to

call publicly for a collective defence alliance against the Soviet Union. In 1987 he envisages a reunited Germany within an alliance-free, nuclear-free Europe; to this too he may be witness.

For diplomacy Escott Reid was in some ways poorly suited. Incapable of Talleyrand's "n'ayez pas de zèle," he was by his own admission deficient in several of the "seven specific diplomatic virtues" famously listed by Harold Nicolson, notably that of calm. "I was shaken by feelings of terror, pity and anger . . ."; "I sweated blood . . . I got very excited"; ". . . I frequently became exhausted. I knew that when I was exhausted I was apt to be bad-tempered and arrogant." Arrogance both fuelled his flight through public life and caused it bumpy stretches. During the 1930s his efforts to reform the CIIA alienated even their supporters: Brooke Claxton found him "obdurate, obstinate and obtuse . . ., a fanatic and completely spoiled and undisciplined. . . ." This mix was made more combustible by perfectionism and workaholic tendencies. ". . . I did not play enough and I worked too hard." His idea of a good time was revising state documents: "I had fun . . . leading a crusade for the use of simple, direct, forceful language. . . ." Although these angularities were mostly smoothed by the years—just as well, for as Reid remarks of Bernard Baruch "an arrogant old man in a hurry is even more dangerous than an arrogant young man in a hurry"—they were never entirely erased.

Colleagues at the Department of External Affairs bore Reid's holy obstinacy in evident exasperation. "He has become quite obsessed lately over the export of arms having exalted it into a crusade against evil" (L. B. Pearson); ". . . Escott is constantly pressing [Pearson] for decision with that sense of urgency which he manages to attach to so many matters of varying importance" (A. D. P. Heeney). In 1947 Pearson, then department head, feared his rising star was burning out: "Escott . . . is emotionally unstable . . . [H]e is showing signs . . . of mental fatigue. This always means for him a certain irrationality of conduct and an intolerance of viewpoint." Top postings were in consequence denied.

Reid's appointment in 1952 as envoy to India—he chose New Delhi over Tokyo or The Hague—was both inspired and congenial: "My views of what should be done to make the world safer and saner were much the same as Nehru's." When these views diverged in 1956 over the Indian leader's hesitancy in condemning the Soviet Union for invading Hungary, his efforts to persuade Nehru to speak out were judged obsessional by Ottawa which rebuked him for this *idée fixe*. Its rebuke seemed to Norman Robertson (then high commissioner in

London) not unmerited but risky. "One of Escott's qualities which much of the time is a source of strength is his faculty for identifying himself unreservedly with the fortunes of the issue or the idea which is uppermost in his mind," Robertson wrote to Pearson. "This means that he sometimes overdoes things and needs pulling up, but I don't think he should ever be pulled down quite so severely as in these two telegrams. I think he has been doing a remarkably good job in India, and he probably wouldn't be doing such a good job if he did not believe it the most important place in the world. This is one of Escott's difficulties." (But by no means his alone, rather a *déformation professionnelle* known to practitioners as "localitis").

Pervading these brilliant recollections are unsparing self-awareness and ruthless self-criticism rarely found in autobiography let alone in diplomatic memoirs; great probity is needed to dredge files for such flaws. Reid's is inherited from and instilled by parents whom the youngest child of the manse revered and loved. From the father, "a good man, a very good man, a devout Christian, something of a Christian socialist," come rectitude, socialism, not much Christianity, temperament: A.J. Reid's career in the church, like his son's in the foreign service, "suffered from outspokenness." Temperament also from the mother, "intelligent, well read, animated, and full of nervous energy," along with intellectuality. If, as Paul Johnson contends, rectitude is seldom compatible with intellectuality (defined as "a special devotion to the interests of humanity and an evangelical duty to advance them"), Reid is an exception: he is an intellectual in Camus's sense as well as Johnson's, someone whose mind keeps watch on itself.

Such a man with such a mind was bound to be disquieted by those occasional accommodations with error, possibly with evil, required of public servants. ". . . I was often frustrated and disappointed," he records of his negotiations on the North Atlantic Treaty. He opposed Canada's support of "a resolution which could be interpreted as authorizing UN forces to cross the 38th parallel, the border between North and South Korea . . . I had no success." He opposed Canada's support of the UN's declaring China to be an aggressor: "I thought at the time that Pearson should not have voted for the resolution and I still think so." These were judgment calls over which honorable people might differ. But even when Canada by turning away refugee Jews and interning Japanese Canadians presented "two problems I had to deal with as a diplomat that aroused my contempt for the policy of my government," he was not driven to resign. His etiquette of duty was to soldier on, for which he offers a rationale admirable in form and

substance. Recalling advice given by Cardinal Villeneuve to L.S. St. Laurent when the latter entered politics—"The good God does not expect you to bear the whole burden of the world on your shoulders. He expects you to bear only your fair share of the burden"—he comments: "[A] diplomat who examined his conscience would ask himself whether, when he had an opportunity to increase the likelihood of his government pursuing a wise course on an issue of foreign policy, large or small, he had done all he could to help the government make the wisest possible decision. Or had he failed because he had been too lazy to work hard at understanding the issue, or had refrained from expressing his honest opinion for fear of endangering his prospects for promotion, or had been unwilling to weigh carefully enough the views of his colleagues, or had not brought to bear on his task the most informed, disciplined, subtle, imaginative, creative, sympathetic judgment of which he was capable?" Perfectionist diplomatist that he has been, Reid often believed that he had failed. But he never failed for these reasons.

Of Robertson, Pearson, Hume Wrong and Dana Wilgress, "the four brightest stars in the External Affairs galaxy" when Reid's own was in its glittering ascendancy during 1945-6, he was fondest of Wilgress but admired Pearson most. "You have more knowledge and understanding and perspicacity and wisdom about foreign affairs than any of your contemporaries," he wrote to Pearson in 1968. In the same letter he urged the prime minister, soon to resign from office, not to fritter retirement upon inconsequential tasks but to concentrate on producing for posterity "the most important book on foreign affairs of the last twenty years." The paragon chose not to follow this advice. "He gave many speeches. He became president of the Ridcau Club. The great memoirs he should have written were not written." Escott Reid's great memoirs are.