

BOOK REVIEWS

Knight of the Holy Spirit. JOY E. ESBEREY. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980. viii, 245 p. ISBN 0 8020 5502 8 \$20.00.

This year saw the last of the annual releases of the William Lyon Mackenzie King diaries. For the past several years we have revelled in the annual accounts of his most peculiar private life. Unfortunately, the result has been a myriad studies detailing incidents about his private life with little real understanding of the reasons for his behaviour. We are led to believe that he was mentally unstable; yet these studies fail to explain a most successful political career, spanning more than twenty years. For this reason, Joy Esbrey's examination of the development of Mackenzie King's personality in her book, *Knight of the Holy Spirit*, is a welcome addition to the Mackenzie King historiography.

William Lyon Mackenzie King was a neurotic, insecure, self-centered individual who struggled throughout his life to establish a mature identity. Because this struggle is well documented in his diary and family letters, Esbrey is able to record and analyze the development of Mackenzie King's personality. She draws upon the "life cycle" theory of Leo Erikson which attempts to examine personality in light of socialization and social environment. This process, whereby the individual attempts to relate to an ever-expanding "life space" of people and institutions, determines the nature of one's identity crisis. Within this analytical framework, Esbrey examines the nature of Mackenzie King's personality, the failure to resolve his identity crisis, and the resulting formation of a set of defence mechanisms in order to sustain his fragile psyche.

The importance of *Knight of the Holy Spirit* is found in its ability to detail the characteristics of Mackenzie King's early life, and then give these elements their due meaning and value. The book concentrates on the impact of the family upon his psychological development; for much of Mackenzie King's early development is spent attempting to reconcile his romantic vision of his family with the reality. Esbrey writes of the parents, John and Isabel King, as being dissatisfied with their own lives and attempting to control their children's lives for their own security and social needs. *Knight of the Holy Spirit* quotes from letters from Isabel King to Willie demanding that he subvert his own desires for the family good. Because neither parent maintained a strictly parental relationship, Mackenzie King becomes a "family hostage", proving in the end incapable of breaking the family bonds to establish an autonomous identity. The results are traumatic; for Mackenzie King becomes unable to sustain any relationship other than the "mateship" type friendships of Bert Harper or Joan Patteson.

The question arises as to how Mackenzie King was able to sustain a successful political career upon such a fragile psyche. Esbrey reveals the existence of a complex set of defence mechanisms which buffered Mackenzie King against the insecurities of the political world. At the constant urgings of his mother, Mackenzie King developed a strong need for, and a pattern of, self-control. It became evident in the diaries' constant worries

about "time wasted." This need, however, led to a constant stream of guilt-ridden rationalizations when intent and self-control failed to affect his actions. In the search for a mature identity, he developed a "work identity" based upon his life as a mission to bring God's teachings to the world. Mackenzie King would be the Holy Spirit's knight. In his life, he applied this service mission to his work as a social worker, a government labour conciliator, and then as a politician and prime minister. As long as Mackenzie King's mission was successful, he could keep most of his insecurities under control. However, with his rigid, regressive self-image Mackenzie King's psyche required constant reassurance. This came through his religious beliefs; for they permitted him to see and accept the presence of God's will around him daily in the real world. Therefore, Mackenzie King was able to move into the world of spiritualism and easily accept the counsel from the 'Beyond'. Far from being evidence of insanity, Mackenzie King's use of spiritualism, and his interpretations of the daily coincidences were important elements in his psyche. Esbrey concludes that these neurotic rituals provided Mackenzie King with the inner strength necessary to maintain his political career.

While *Knight of the Holy Spirit* reveals the details of Mackenzie King's personality, it fails to add to our understanding of his political leadership. Esbrey suggests that the inner psychology of the man ensured that particular sets of circumstances produced specific results. Therefore, his approach to policy implementation following the 1919 Liberal Convention, his approach to labour conciliation, and his attempts at international peacemaking are all based upon the early notions of partnership in the King family. While Esbrey's analysis aids our understanding of Mackenzie King's leadership style, it is difficult to accept explanations for historical events based upon childhood determinants. It ignores too many important political, economic and social factors which contributed to the formation of any event. The fundamental problem with Esbrey's explanations is that they leave no room for the development of character. Her analysis of Mackenzie King's personality ends before his political career as party leader and prime minister begins, and we are left to accept the fact that Mackenzie King's political experiences have little effect in the face of childhood determinants.

One of the key elements in writing psycho-history is the handling of documentary evidence. An ever-present danger is that suggestion, taken from one source and based upon inference, can be built into explanations without the presence of independent evidence. It is essential that psycho-history develop its analysis upon concurrent witnesses. It is refreshing to see that for the most part *Knight of the Holy Spirit* is based upon a mixture of the Mackenzie King diaries and family letters. While it may be true that the diaries represent a most important source for the study of Canadian political history, they have become over-rated as a research tool. One is reminded of Gratton O'Leary's comment that the diaries are "not worth two pieces". For too long the diaries have been used indiscriminately as the most important, or even the only source for an examination of Mackenzie King. Without other documentation, it is impossible to separate the real from the idealized self as expressed in the diaries. In *Knight of the Holy Spirit*, Esbrey is able to collaborate the diaries' evidence with that found in the family letters. Her analysis succeeds only as long as she has that independent evidence; but when the family correspondence loses its detail following the deaths of Mackenzie King's mother and brother, Esbrey's explanation is forced to rely upon the diaries and secondary sources. It is unfortunate that the author did not use the correspondence between Mackenzie King and his numerous friends and acquaintances. These documents in the Personal Correspondence series would have provided another set of independent witnesses, spanning Mackenzie King's entire life. Unlike his political correspondence which in large part were written for him by civil servants, these personal letters reflect Mackenzie King's own thoughts as well as the opinions and reactions of close acquaintances. For example, Esbrey would have found the letters documenting two early romances where Mackenzie King is referred to as the "dear boy," or "my child". Further examination of Mackenzie King's personality must await the availability of more documentation.

Given the example of the *Knight of the Holy Spirit*, it is obvious that the writing of psycho-history can not be left to the amateur. These studies need to be based upon analytical frameworks, using a thorough examination of all the documentation evidence. Joy Esbrey's *Knight of the Holy Spirit* shows what can result from such an approach. For the first time, we have a detailed examination of Mackenzie King's personality, and an explanation of the importance of his neurotic rituals, even if *Knight of the Holy Spirit* fails to add to our understanding of Mackenzie King's political behaviour. Its explanations of political events are too reliant upon childhood determinants and the documentary witnesses, independent of the diaries, are not used. Perhaps the real contribution of *Knight of the Holy Spirit* will be to show future historians how the Mackenzie King papers must be used.

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A Woman with a Purpose; the Diaries of Elizabeth Smith, 1872-1884. Edited by VERONICA STRONG-BOAG. Toronto : University of Toronto Press, 1980. xxxviii, 298 p. illus. ISBN 0 8020 2360 6 bd. \$25.00, 0 8020 6397 7 pa. \$10.00.

Devotées of the diary will not find a tableau of brilliant society etched with the bite of perceptive wit in *Woman With A Purpose* — an edition of the diaries of Elizabeth Smith of Winona, sometime public school teacher, accomplished musician and aspiring physician. But if her society was not grand, her struggles common and her prose rather plain, Elizabeth Smith was a woman from us all. She has a mixture of humours and ambitions, recorded with disarming candour in diaries which she kept in a desultory fashion from 1872 to 1884. Although she remained true to the stern methodist precepts which nurtured her, Elizabeth loved life as much as God, sought worldly praise as much as God-given grace and, as often as not, revealed a fine pride in her competitive achievements. Elizabeth loved and was loved, she had her own fair share of pride and envy and as the diaries progress, she plainly becomes more determined to advance beyond the social and professional restrictions on women as teachers. Elizabeth's new purpose is to become a physician.

Encouraged by her mother and Dr. Jennie Trout, Elizabeth strives to overcome the considerable social and educational barriers to the medical education of women in Ontario. With the moral support of like-minded colleagues such as Alice McGillivray and the substantial assistance of sympathetic academics like Principal Grant of Queen's, Elizabeth does achieve her ostensible goal, graduating in the first class from the Kingston Womens' Medical College in 1883. Her deeper purpose, as revealed in the pages of her diary, seems to have been far more basic than the successful completion of a medical degree: it was, in her chosen occupation whether it be teacher or musician, to be outstanding in all endeavours, to compete in a mixed setting and above all, to win the competition. In *A Woman With A Purpose* we are presented with a true mirror image of Elizabeth Smith's personal development and professional struggle. As such, the volume is a welcome addition to the Social History of Canada series.

Although the Diaries have some independent claim for attention as items of Victorian life and letters, *A Woman With A Purpose* is particularly recommended to those interested in the history of education and medicine for the insights it gives into the emergent professionalisation of these two disciplines. Elizabeth's bitter-sweet experiences as a rural school teacher and her relentless pursuit of upgrading through an almost constant round of model school courses points to a far more graded and decentralized system of teacher education than exists today. Having cleared the considerable preliminary