

La littérature intime du Québec ought to be a popular book. The topic arouses curiosity because it discusses many well-known people, such as Gabrielle Roy, Solange Chapat-Rolland, Guy Frégault, and André Laurendeau. Van Roey-Roux's treatment of them is sound and professional. Non-specialists should not be deterred, and the more specialized reader will find the work a valuable reference tool.

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Willie: A Romance. HEATHER ROBERTSON. Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1983. 359 p. ISBN 0-88862-671-1 \$19.95.

Over the last eight years, Canadians have developed an increasing fascination with the private life of William Lyon Mackenzie King. It began in 1976 when C.P. Stacey's *A Very Double Life* revealed Mackenzie King's personal, sexual, and spiritualist peculiarities. The public's interest grew each year thereafter with the annual release of King's diaries by the Public Archives of Canada. They led in turn to a variety of books, plays, television and radio programmes, and newspaper articles on King and his private life. Heather Robertson's *Willie: A Romance* is the latest addition to these writings.

Willie: A Romance is the story of Lilly Coolican, an Ottawa Valley girl who escapes Renfrew County for pre-World War I Ottawa. The book is in fact Lilly's life as recorded in her diary, begun at twelve when she got her first camera. Because her deceased father used to be a "Booth man," Lilly gets her first job as a secretary to lumber baron, J.R. Booth. She is carried forth by Ottawa's patronage system, thus launching the reader on a dazzling *rendez-vous* with history and historical figures as Lilly eventually becomes a secretary to the Duchess of Connaught, the Governor-General's wife. We meet the Duke and Duchess, their daughter Princess Patricia, R.B. Bennett, Sir Wilfrid Laurier and his wife Zoe, and John D. Rockefeller Jr., among others. As the first of three intended volumes concludes, Lilly is establishing herself as an Ottawa photographer.

Through Lilly's diary, Robertson presents interesting vignettes of pre-World War I Canada. There is the fascinating trip to Alberta by the Governor General, his wife, and daughter as the upper class British duke strives to fulfil his vice-regal duties. Equally intriguing is the story of the home front in Ottawa as women organized and struggled to support the war effort. The struggle was not always united, and the book recounts the religious divisions which usually marred fund-raising activities. When Lilly Coolican is describing the atmosphere of Ottawa and the characters thus recede into the background, *Willie: A Romance* works best.

Lilly's diary entry for 15 August 1914 records a frightening encounter with a strange man while walking near the Rideau River at night. It is Lilly's first meeting with William Lyon Mackenzie King. From this first encounter, Lilly and Willie develop a lasting friendship which leads to their secret wedding in November 1917. The reader is left dangling at the volume's end as to whether he will announce or renounce their marriage. It is in Robertson's treatment of King that *Willie: A Romance* falters. Certainly she presents interesting and vivid descriptions of King's work for Rockefeller in Colorado. She also captures the sad and tragic relationship

between King and his dying mother. However, much of this story is not new; Robertson has relied heavily on the King diaries. Most readers are now familiar with King's strange devotion to his mother and Robertson's detailed accounting of that relationship is repetition enough.

Mackenzie King is not the only man in Lilly Coolican's life. In August 1914, she also meets Lieutenant Talbot Papineau, the great-grandson of Louis-Joseph Papineau. Lilly grows to love Talbot, even though he soon leaves for the war with the Princess Patricia Light Infantry. Lilly's diary records Talbot's letters to her from the war and through them we get a picture of its horror. Talbot Papineau actually was a lieutenant in the Light Infantry and, as Robertson describes, died in France in 1917. She refers to letters in the Public Archives of Canada and in the possession of his law partner that were used in preparing her book. In part, Robertson's Papineau letters appear to be from the Agar Adamson Papers in the Public Archives (MG 30, E 149). Adamson was also an officer in the Princess Patricia Light Infantry and in his weekly letters to his wife he described the war, its conditions, and its effects on the troops. Interestingly, the Adamson Papers present a much more descriptive picture of the war. His weekly letters provide a rich and imaginative source, and one superior to Papineau's in *Willie*.

The purpose of historical fiction is to stimulate the reader's imagination using real and imaginary characters against a back-drop of historical circumstance. Both characters and circumstances must have some element of plausibility in order for the reader to suspend disbelief and let imagination take over. Here, then, is the basic problem with Robertson's book. Certain episodes are so implausible that they grate upon one's imagination. The titillating episodes where Lilly introduces King to "sweet grass" and their marriage, which occurred at a time in King's real life when he was incapable of sustaining any relationship, appear as mere sensationalism, leaving the reader in disbelief.

In many regards this sensationalism is the inevitable result of years of public attention on the King diaries. With Stacey's book and the first diary releases, there was an air of disbelief; how could such a quiet, reserved politician have such an eccentric private life? Gradually we moved away from the known facts about King to concentrate on, and speculate about, other hidden aspects of his life. There were suggestions of affairs with prostitutes, homosexuality, incest, and even a secret marriage. As one incredible revelation in the diaries followed another, it seemed nothing was beyond the realm of possibility. Speculation became more interesting than fact.

Mackenzie King presents a very difficult task for the novelist wishing to use him as a character in fiction in order to stimulate our interest and imagination. With all the revelations, King is such a distinct character in real life that no fictionalization is plausible. We have already seen and imagined all that there is in the private life of William Lyon Mackenzie King. This is no real loss for the original sources are just as rich. The Adamson Papers and the King diaries are examples of how the original sources not only have the virtue of being true, but also have the advantage of being just as stimulating as fiction.

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