

***The Senator George D. Aiken Papers:
Sources for the Study of
Canadian-American Relations,
1930-1974***

by CONNELL GALLAGHER

In the fall of 1974 a large truck arrived at a newly occupied library storage area of the University of Vermont. The Senator George D. Aiken Papers had arrived. The staff of Special Collections was excited because the collection was one it had sought at the highest levels — the president signed the delivery voucher. The eighty-seven wooden crates, which took over a year to unpack, were to be the capstone of the university's strong political collections. The library has a great deal of manuscript material which documents the frequent interactions between Vermont and Canada from the Haldimand negotiations during the Revolutionary War through the International Joint Commission, but the library staff had never looked at these collections as forming a discrete research mass on Canada. The Aiken Papers have prompted a reassessment. They have turned out to be the most important of these "Canadian" collections both in quantity of material and in quality. There are ten linear feet of papers on the St. Lawrence Seaway Project (ca. 1930-1974) and another four linear feet of records on a side issue in the seaway controversy, the Lake Champlain Waterway Cut-off. (It was never built.) The bulk of these records falls within the period when Aiken served as a senator, 1941-1974. These papers have never been used by scholars.

George Aiken (1892-1984) attained his greatest prominence and influence in Washington as a senator from Vermont; every pronouncement and decision he made had its effect. Other politicians watched and made their decisions accordingly, and presidents consulted with the "wizened old owl" regularly. Senator Aiken also served in the Vermont State Legislature (1931-1935) and as Governor of Vermont (1935-1941). During his years in public office he reported his occupation as "farmer," for he owned a horticultural business in his home town of Putney, Vermont. Aiken never lost sight of the fact that the primary role of Vermont public officials was to serve the Vermont farmer. His first and most important committee assignment in the Senate was as a member of the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, and he maintained this seat until his retirement thirty-three years later. Aiken, however, learned that membership on the Agriculture Committee alone was not all that was required, and he accepted appointment to the prestigious and demanding Foreign Relations Committee in 1954. This was a big step for a small town Vermonter with only a high school education, but as historian Mark A. Stoler points out, "He had quickly discovered in Washington that measures to aid American agriculture were inextricably interwoven with foreign affairs."¹

1 Mark A. Stoler, "Reflections on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee During the 1960's: George D. Aiken," a paper presented at the third national meeting of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, 6 August 1977, p. 2.

Throughout his career, Aiken believed that America's most powerful economic tool was food production, but he was realistic enough to understand that America could not feed the world. He felt that the U.S. should concentrate on the Western Hemisphere and that it should use agricultural foreign aid as a tool to resist the spread of Communism, which thrived on poverty, starvation, and ignorance. He saw Canada as an important partner in this struggle. The ulterior motive in Aiken's plan to develop the St. Lawrence Seaway was to provide Vermont farmers with cheap electric power and access to world markets through the Lake Champlain Waterway. He was also aware of the seaway's importance for shipping war materiel.

Although the seaway was not completed until long after World War II was over, Aiken worked tirelessly for its passage from the time he entered the Senate in 1941. In an interview with Charles Morrissey in 1975 Aiken placed the St. Lawrence Seaway issue in context:

That was the issue that I went to Washington on, if you want to select any one issue. All the utility companies were opposed to it and big business generally was opposing it. And they stated during the campaign of 1940 that if I got to Washington I'd vote for that St. Lawrence Seaway and power project. I certainly would. I agreed with them on that. Then I went to Washington and I worked for it for some time.²

One might take Aiken's statement with a grain of salt, for he intended to get to Washington anyway. He had served two terms as governor and the U.S. Senate was the next logical step for an ambitious politician. But why did he choose to so highlight the seaway in this statement? Even more relevant from an archival point of view, why did he save every scrap of paper on the seaway when other parts of his papers have been literally cleaned out?³ The seaway project is perhaps the only issue in the Aiken Papers on which the documentation has been preserved intact. Mark Stoler suggests the rationale for Aiken's interest in the St. Lawrence Seaway Project was its value as a bulwark against Communism. There was even a more important and "close to home" reason for his ardour. Aiken was always interested in Canada because proximity to this large and important nation meant a great deal to Vermont. Vermont has spent most of its history in the backwaters of American politics and, together with New Hampshire and Maine, has even remained outside of the mainstream of New England affairs. Canada as a threat (Revolutionary War and War of 1812) and as a promise have brought U.S. investment and interest in Vermont. The abundance of Quebec hydroelectric power transmitted to the United States with Vermont as a conduit is a case in point.

As Chairman of both the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Canada and the Senate Section of the Canada/United States Interparliamentary Group, Aiken's major legislative effort was focussed on the passage of the St. Lawrence Seaway Bill. He

2 University of Vermont, Bailey/Howe Library, Charles T. Morrissey and D. Gregory Sanford, "George D. Aiken Oral History Memoir," 1981, pp. 114-15.

3 Mrs. Lola Aiken, the senator's wife, once admitted to me that the staff had no appreciation of archives or the legacy of the historical record and that large quantities of records were thrown out before 1960. She, however, as his Administrative Aide placed a great deal of importance on the papers. The folders and boxes were all carefully labelled and there was a four-hundred page guide to the contents. This guide served our needs for five years until we prepared a complete folder listing for the collection. There were, and still are, shortcomings in our intellectual control over the collection and we are trying to eliminate these by producing a more detailed index.

followed this issue from the time he entered politics in the early 1930s, and it was a major topic in his campaign for governor in 1935; he realized that Vermont's economic survival depended on strong ties with Canada.⁴ Canada had served alternately as a market and a source for raw materials in the nineteenth century. There was great potential for providing a trade outlet through the Lake Champlain Waterway as well as an opportunity to purchase cheap hydroelectric power if the seaway was undertaken.

The Aiken Papers include over 15,000 items on the St. Lawrence Seaway from 1932 to 1974. There is extensive correspondence from a national and international constituency, both "for" and "against" letters from lobby and pressure groups in the Midwest, the South, and the Northeast, letters from three American Presidents, and Governor Thomas E. Dewey of New York, power companies, chambers of commerce, and politicians at all levels. In addition, there are extensive Congressional bills and amendments, hearings and reports, statistical studies on transportation, electric power, and national security. This collection represents a veritable tour de force of documentation on the St. Lawrence Seaway, from its conception to the agreement to build (1932-1954), and throughout construction and the first years of service to 1974.

How does an archives approach a collection such as the Aiken Papers? A large political collection can be a heavy burden on an archives staff. It could be smothered by such a mass of paper. No matter how exciting, a large "glamorous" accession must not drown other responsibilities. The tax on its small staff and limited resources forced the library to be creative and realistic. At first, part-time student help, then volunteers, and employees hired under the *Comprehensive Employment Training Act* worked on the collection, all with mixed results. Approximately five years after the Aiken Papers were acquired, they were discovered by the history department. Two historians of American social history raided the archives with their students, and the Archives Practicum was born. (The practicum is a course designed to introduce students to the mysteries of the archival profession while gaining processing staff at the same time. This programme added the equivalent of approximately one person to the staff per year.)

The library then began applying for grants. It was successful here, but funds were not made available for the processing of contemporary political collections, that is, over one-third of the library's holdings. It did receive a National Endowment for the Humanities grant to process nineteenth-century business records and managed to insert under the business rubric the papers of a twentieth-century Vermont governor who was also an industrialist. Most recently the library was awarded a U.S. Department of Education Title II-C Grant for the Strengthening of Research Library Resources for our Canadian Studies collections. This one-year project will focus on manuscript collections which relate to Canada, and more specifically to Canadian-American relations. A large portion of the Aiken Papers was included in this proposal.

It is our hope that the U.S. Department of Education Title II-C grant will help to make these papers available to the scholarly community. We hope first to publish a guide which will highlight the materials, especially manuscripts, of interest for the study of Canada and Canadian-American relations. Second, we plan to microfilm the fourteen linear feet of material on the St. Lawrence Seaway which Aiken preserved. This film will be available for purchase and loan from the University of Vermont Library. We have applied to the

4 The library holds the papers of Alfred Heining, Aiken's Democratic opponent for governor. This collection also includes material on the St. Lawrence Seaway.

U.S. Department of Education for a second year on the project to focus on our extensive collection of *International Joint Commission* resources. This project would result in the publication of a comprehensive annotated bibliography of IJC publications as well as a description of manuscript holdings and a second microfilming project. Letters of support for this project would be welcome.