

**Canada's Department of External Affairs. Volume 1: The Early Years, 1906-1946.** JOHN HILLIKER. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990. xxxii, 406 p. ISBN 0-7735-0736-1 \$45.00 (cl.) 0-7735-6751-5 \$19.95 (pa.).

This book is the twentieth to be published as part of a series on Canadian public administration and public policy sponsored by the Institute of Public Administration of Canada. It is the third official history of a federal government organization; the previous two dealt with the Public Service Commission and the Department of Trade and Commerce. This volume has been a long time in preparation — a first draft was prepared by the Department of External Affairs' historical division nearly ten years ago but it fell under the watchful eye of an editorial board, was affected by staff cuts in the division, and competed with the publication of a major document series. Fortunately, the work went ahead and this volume is the result.

The Department of External Affairs began as a branch of the federal government in 1909, assuming certain duties from the existing Secretary of State. The new organization carried its parent's name as part of its own, and, for its first decade and a half, acted primarily as the government's secretariat for foreign and imperial matters. Only in the last twenty years of the period covered by this volume did the department grow into something resembling a foreign office. At first External Affairs inherited from the Secretary of State responsibilities for passports, extradition, naturalization and consular services. To these were added other duties traditionally performed by the Office of the Governor-General and by various departments, most notably Trade and Commerce and the High Commissioner's Office in London.

In Laurier's second term a large number of outstanding issues with the United States needed to be settled but there was an absence in Ottawa of a central clearing-house for external issues and the communication route between Washington and Canada was via London and the Governor-General. The impetus for setting up the new department came from three sources: Lord Grey, Governor-General, 1904-1911, James Bryce, British Ambassador in Washington, 1907-1913, and Under-Secretary of State Joseph Pope, with the support of the prime minister. Three-quarters of Bryce's business in the United States concerned Canada, yet he could not deal directly with Ottawa nor could he always count on prompt action by Canadian officials on the diplomatic correspondence received from his embassy. Laurier saw the need for change, and a bill was introduced into the House of Commons in 1909 aimed at creating a department which would help to improve the administration of external affairs by, among other things, keeping track from day to day of despatches and foreign issues in general. Inherent in the bill was a means of the future development and conduct of an autonomous foreign policy. So with two officers and a miniscule support staff the new department joined the ranks of the federal public service.

For the first few years the department did not progress much beyond the modest role of transmitting requests and information to other departments and agencies, and issuing passports. The war brought more business and an increased work load, but the range of duties were for the most part unchanged. When Mackenzie King became prime minister in 1921, and also minister responsible for the department, real change began. King wanted to stay out of imperial international obligations and he wanted Canada to have a more autonomous role in its own external relations. He would require more than the three officers then on staff to bring this about.

At first, with the growing number of international issues facing Canada during the early 1920s, King reached outside the public service for policy advice. One of those consulted was O.D. Skelton of Queen's University. From this time on, the story of External Affairs becomes that of Skelton and his role in the birth of the Canadian diplomatic service, even though he was not officially appointed under-secretary until 1925. Skelton saw Canada in charge of its own foreign relations, with enough resources in its foreign service to carry out that role. Part two of *The Early Years* outlines how Skelton, with King's support, went about creating a team capable of guiding Canada's changing position within the Empire/Commonwealth and on the larger world stage.

Readers of institutional histories are accustomed to accounts of the rise and fall of various administrative units, the struggles for turf and resources within the organization, the rise and fall of prominent players, and the search for recognition, adequate salaries, supplies and accommodation, and so on. They will not be completely disappointed for these are features of this story. Likewise, institutional histories stress roles, policies, and activities; so does this volume, but only to the degree necessary to demonstrate how they brought about administrative adaptations and deployment of personnel.

External Affairs is a unit of the federal government which, like the Department of Finance, the Treasury Board Secretariat, and the Privy Council Office, deals with policy issues and provides advice to the government of the day. The soundness of that advice and the strength of the policy depends on the capabilities of the departmental staff. Skelton insisted from the very beginning that the officers brought into the department would be the best available. Because of the overlap between External Affairs and the prime minister's staff throughout this period, recruits had to be acceptable to the prime minister as well as to the under-secretary. The latter was, in reality, the prime minister's deputy who provided advice on a whole range of domestic issues in addition to having regular responsibility for foreign policy. The dominant role of Skelton and of those he drew around him makes the story of this governmental unit unique. Beginning in 1926-1927, the young Canadians who joined the department remained in its ranks long after the period covered by the book, and this first volume is the story of their struggles and achievements within the fledgling organization.

There is a feature of this book which is of interest to archivists, namely, the sources used in its preparation. Canada's external relations is the subject of a vast array of published works, and the range and number of them is apparent from the footnotes; close to one-half of the sources cited fall into this category. A second important source of information available to the author and researchers included the participants themselves. Skelton's first recruits came from the academic world, many had post-graduate degrees, some had university teaching experience, most were able to analyse issues and to express their ideas clearly and effectively in writing. It was common for many of these officers to keep diaries and notes, and to exchange letters both with each other and with persons outside External Affairs. Several of them published memoirs after retirement; these often contain first-hand accounts and impressions of a career in the diplomatic ranks. A number of them have deposited these writings in archives across the country where they represent a treasure-house of primary information for researchers. It is doubtful whether any other branch of the federal government, with the possible exceptions of the Department of Finance and the Bank of Canada, could boast of such literary output from its staff.

A third aspect of interest to archivists is that the story presented is the "official" version, published with the department's blessing, and may well constitute the lasting

full-length account of its early administrative life. Yet the official files which have survived and which were used by the author do not provide more than a flimsy outline of events of the first twenty years. Among the records of the department consulted are three main series, the central registry files 1909-1939 (the '39 series), those created between 1940 and 1963 (the '40 series), and the files of the office of the Under-Secretary (the "Skelton-Robertson Papers"). If the extensive cache of personal papers had not been at hand this story may have been leaner and less interesting to read, especially for the 1909 to 1939 period. It should be pointed out that the department was set up primarily to act as a channel of communication and to be the repository for the accumulated documents and records needed by the federal government in the conduct of international relations. Information dispersed throughout several departments was to be centralized in the new centre of information — in other words, a diplomatic archives. From the beginning, new files were opened, not according to subject, although such filing systems were in use in Ottawa at the time, but according to simple consecutive numbering as created. The numbering system began with "1" for each new year, and the last two digits of each year were added to the end of the file number. Handwritten bound registers and indexes served as reference and location tools. Of the total original '39 series of files created, approximately one-third survived; the other two-thirds was the victim of at least two "weedings" by departmental officials. The selection criteria used to reduce this body of records to its present size are shrouded in mystery. It is doubtful whether evidential or informational values were considered. What came down to us is a curious mixture of files ranging from the clearly mundane to others of the highest evidential value. The '40 series is likewise organized in numerical sequence, although not by year, with a slight attempt to group major subjects. These two series are supplemented by the policy files of the "Skelton-Robertson Papers" and by the small "s" and "50,000" series for classified documents beginning in 1940.

All in all, this account of External Affairs' first thirty-seven years is successful in fulfilling its stated intention to limit the treatment of policy issues and foreign events and to focus on administrative development. Readers seeking comprehensive details on policy matters need to look elsewhere. The abundance of existing sources is generously footnoted. The description of people and of their contributions should stir an interest in further research into these talented and influential public servants and their roles in these formative years. Some of the better-known stresses and strains that occurred among this group are not dealt with here. Perhaps it would not be diplomatic to bring up internal squabbles in public (one can see the departmental editorial board off in a corner).

Despite the concern over image and decorum, it is fortunate that the department went ahead with the publication. This is a fascinating story of the growth of Canada as an independent member of the world community as seen through the emergence of a small yet influential part of its national government. Let us hope that volume two will not keep us waiting another ten years.

**J.W. O'Brien**  
National Archives of Canada

**The Great Naval Battle of Ottawa.** DAVID ZIMMERMAN. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989. x, 209 p. ISBN 0-8020-2687-7.

**The RCN in Transition, 1910-1985.** W.A.B. DOUGLAS, ed. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1988. xi, 411 p. ISBN 0-7748-0312-6.