
Mackenzie King: The Young Journalist

by Arthur Milnes

Most of Canada's Prime Ministers were lawyers. Sir John A. Macdonald entered a Napanee, Ontario law office at the age of 15. Brian Mulroney cut his teeth in Montreal legal circles. John Diefenbaker's legal exploits are a Prairie legend. The list goes on.

But Canada's longest serving Prime Minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King, never saw a courtroom or legal boardroom. His arrival in politics followed a stint pounding the pavement as a reporter in Toronto during the final decade of the last century.

King was Prime Minister for twenty-two years, longer even than Macdonald, but he is remembered now mostly for belief in the supernatural including the ability to communicate with his mother and others who had passed away. His is also remembered for the massive personal diary he kept which continues to enthrall and confuse students and historians alike.

Few are aware of another aspect of his life, his career as a journalist. Indeed, his reporting for the *Globe* and the *Daily Mail and Empire* had a great deal to do with his eventual entry into government and politics. King came to journalism naturally. His grandfather was none other than William Lyon Mackenzie, newspaper editor, publisher and leader of the 1837 rebellion in Upper Canada. The Toronto Historical Board still operates a 19th century newspaper press in Mackenzie's house on Bond Street. King's father, John King of Berlin, Ontario (now Kitchener) had been an editor and life-long contributor to the *Berlin Telegraph*.

Mackenzie King was only 16 when he arrived in Toronto as a student at the University of Toronto in the fall of 1891. After his arrival, he naturally gravitated towards the school paper and his name soon appeared in the *Varsity*. By the time of his graduation in 1895, King had been an assistant editor and head of the sport's department at the school paper. Throughout his undergraduate years, King made a habit of regularly submitting articles to the *Globe* concerning Varsity

events. His first *Globe* article appears to be an October 5, 1893 account of Varsity's victory over Upper Canada College in rugby. This practice continued and he even offered the same services to *Saturday Night* magazine but was rejected.

He had planned to continue in academia but plans for a fellowship fell through and King had to find a job. So, he found himself a position with the *Globe* as a reporter during the fall of 1895. They paid him the grand total of \$7 a week. Though it was not his first choice of a job, he was soon telling his diary that a year in journalism would be "an extra year of practical experience in the great school of life."

King was assigned the police-court beat for the paper. "I had a zigzag route to follow today, and the extremes seemed far apart. This morning I was at the police court, recording lists of drunks, vagrants, burglars, ...cases of non-support and the like. This kept me busy till nearly noon," he wrote in his diary on March 13, 1896, describing part of his day on the job.

He stayed at the *Globe* for nearly nine months and earned \$275.75 before departing for graduate school in Chicago in late 1896.

When he came back to Toronto in the summer of 1897, he once again had to find a job and turned to journalism. This time it was with the *Daily Mail and Empire*, and his work there had a great deal to do with his eventual arrival in Ottawa and entry into politics.¹

In September 1897, King spent several days working on a special feature about the living and working conditions among Toronto's poor and mostly immigrant classes. What he saw shocked him. "What a day I have had today and how I have witnessed the oppression of man over his fellows," the 22-year-old wrote in his diary after touring a local sweat-shop during his research. The result was four full-page articles in Saturday editions of the *Mail and Empire* during September and October of 1897. Toronto readers were given blunt descriptions of the filth and oppression which was a daily part of life for thousands of Toronto's immigrant workers.

Readers were introduced to, among others, a middle aged garment worker who, "could hardly speak with a consumptive cough which is taking her life away." The

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woman had worked in the garment trade most of her life and her daughters were also employed in the industry. King also described them. "A little girl, 16 years of age, who is thin and sickly in appearance, stood by her side and related how she had worked for the past eight years for a large wholesale house, most of the time for two dollars a week. She now intended to help her mother at the machine," King wrote, adding that her nine-year-old sister was also employed as a labourer.

King also gave readers the other side of the story and interviewed a local sweat-shop owner who had been in the business for over 10 years and who employed 15 workers at the time. "When I asked what he paid them he said, 'Well, I have to work hard myself and I do the best I can. I do not treat the men bad but I end up taking advantage of the women. I have a girl here who can do as much and as good work as a man and she gets \$5 a week. The man who is standing next to her gets \$11', he matter-of-factly told the young *Mail and Empire* reporter.

King's series also dealt with crowded housing in Toronto's immigrant communities, and the racism blacks experienced in the city. He wrote that there were about 800 blacks in Toronto and that unfortunately, because of racism, most of the men left Toronto because there were better opportunities in the United States. He also related the story of how the community was saddened by a recent example of racism on the part of the local military. "Especially were they grieved when one of their number, after having practiced for six months in the band of a city regiment, and after having been granted his uniform, was refused admission when about to be sworn in and given the reason that he might look like a black horse among a lot of white ones," King wrote.

With these facts in hand, and before publication of his articles, the gutsy young man marched off with his father to tell a family friend about what he had seen in the homes and sweat-shops of Toronto. The friend was William Mulock, Postmaster General in the newly elected government of Sir Wilfrid Laurier.

King informed the Minister that much of the work being performed in the sweat-shops was being done for government clothing contracts, mostly for the militia and post office. This was hardly a situation that Canada's first Liberal government in twenty-five years could allow and King knew it.

On the spot, Mulock commissioned the reporter to write a report to him about the sweat shop system. One week later, the Minister announced reforms in his own department regarding clothing contracts. By October, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, hearing of King's work, changed the process so that all government contracts would have clauses demanding reasonable hours of work, fair wages and sanitary conditions for workers. King had accomplished every investigative reporter's dream. He had caused positive change through his work.

The situation was not bad for a 22-year-old and King was not unaware of its significance. "This has been the first influential part I have played in the history of Canadian politics," he wrote in his faithful diary.

Former TV Ontario Chairman and King biographer, Bernard Ostry, advises caution in heaping too much praise onto King for such incidents. "If you recognize who he regarded as his masters and look at his later work for the Rockefellers, you have to think," Ostry says from his home in Toronto. "His deep interest in the poor and weak, though probably genuine, was combined with a stronger desire to become known to the rich and the powerful," he says.

Ostry might be correct in suggesting we question King's motives for approaching someone like the Postmaster General in this situation but this should not take away from his very real accomplishments in this case.

In any event, Laurier and Mulock were very impressed with the young Mackenzie King and they did not forget him. Three years later, they invited King to join them in Ottawa as editor of the new *Labour Gazette*, and once having arrived in Ottawa, he began his climb to the Prime Minister's Office. †

Notes

1. The *Mail and Empire* was known for its Conservative sympathies and one of King's friends is still surprised he took a job with them. "He never talked to me about being a reporter," King's former secretary and confidant Jack Pickersgill, 86, says from Ottawa, "but I remember being very surprised that he would write for the *Mail and Empire* considering what a Tory organ it was." Maybe economics had something to do with the abandonment of King's partisanship.