

Millar apologized. Goodyear-Grant suggests that female politicians, their male allies and political parties should “take every opportunity to challenge prevailing (masculine) norms.” Perhaps that prompt apology represents progress. But this scholarly book indicates that damaging gendered assumptions still underpin Canada’s media and political worlds – and they do influence the voters.

Mary Janigan

Journalist and Author of *Let The Eastern Bastards Freeze in the Dark: The West Versus The Rest Since Confederation*

O.D. Skelton: The Work of The World, 1923-1941 Edited by Norman Hillmer, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal & Kingston, 2013, 517p.

Although many civil servants will concur that their chosen profession has the potential to bring them much personal fulfillment, few would suggest they enter this field with visions of achieving great fame. Some might even argue that fame—or worse, notoriety—is exactly what civil servants are expected to avoid at all cost. Theirs is a working life confined mostly to obscurity while the ministers of their departments operate as the public face of their collective efforts, successes and failures.

With this in mind, it is refreshing to see an historian shine a light on the work of one civil servant whose counsel on foreign policy was routinely sought by both Liberal and Conservative prime ministers during a period of great international upheaval. Carleton University professor Norman Hillmer’s edited collection of

Oscar Douglas Skelton’s official memoranda, diaries and letters provides readers with not only a portrait of a trusted civil servant, but also the man behind the memos. Hillmer’s informative introductory note presents a strong narrative foundation for the subsequent collection of annotated documents. Reproduced chronologically and divided by key events or periods, he provides readers with a window into the world of a biographer working his way through the archives.

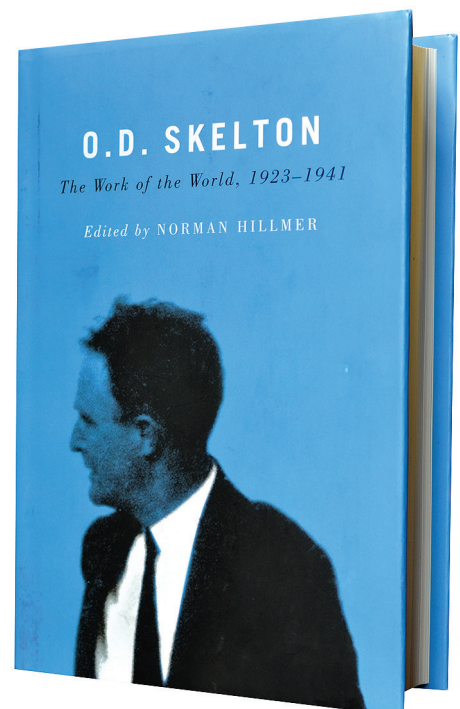
When Skelton was recruited to the Department of External Affairs in 1923, Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King deemed the new hire’s staunch anti-imperialism (at least with respect to the British Empire in Canada) and his proscriptions for an independent Canadian foreign policy to be a strong foundation for the country’s approach to external affairs. The new hire would almost immediately make his mark with a memorandum titled “Canada and the Control of Foreign Policy,” which King brought to his first Imperial Conference as prime minister.

Some historians have dismissed Skelton’s work on this document, which outlined Canada’s emerging foreign policy, as that of a partisan hack (he had been active in Liberal circles for some time and had previously worked with King at the end of Laurier’s government) and an effort which sought to solve problems that no longer existed in terms of British imperialist designs on the dominions and colonies. However, in his introductory note, Hillmer suggests that while it was clearly a partisan document, Skelton’s memorandum was a direct

response to Britain’s continued insistence on “diplomatic unity” and deference to the British Foreign Office on important matters. Furthermore, he notes that Skelton’s interventions, which played a role in the dominions’ constitutional progress, were credited by South Africa’s prime minister as helping to make it “Canada’s conference.”

Hillmer’s thoughtful choice of annotations in these documents equips readers with information that provide context and colour. For instance, in an excerpt of the famous 1923 memorandum, Hillmer highlights a hand-written note of approval (“very good”) from Mackenzie King beside a passage noting that although each part of the Empire has its own distinct sphere of interests, these spheres occasionally intersect and some interests are shared. Other notes offer important historical explanation, introductions to key players or citations for further exploration.

Hillmer’s biographical sketch



is careful to note that Skelton was “not anti-British, nor anti-empire. It was imperialism and the agents of imperialism that were his enemies” (p. 13). Indeed, Skelton’s world view saw Canada as British North America while Britain was British West Europe.

Despite his partisan background, Skelton continued to serve when Conservative R.B. Bennett formed a government in 1930. After some initial misgivings and clashes of opinion which led Bennett to consider firing him, Hillmer notes that Skelton was soon found to be indispensable.

As King’s Liberals returned to government, troubles in Europe pointed to the possibility of renewed military conflict. Skelton, fearing impending divisions in Canada, clearly favoured an isolationist policy in the lead-up to World War II and expressed disappointment when King stated that the possibility of Canada staying out of a British war with Germany was nil. Skelton suggested the wary attitude of Canada’s francophones was “really Canadian” (p. 44); yet he noted that a majority would support participation in war provided there was no conscription. The civil servant’s isolationist sympathies did not preclude him from acknowledging the likelihood of war and his views on conflict shifted as Germany invaded France and set its sights on Britain.

At the time of Skelton’s unexpected death, in the midst of a particularly bleak period during the Second World War, Lester B. Pearson, then working in the Office of the High Commissioner for Canada in London, lamented that “seldom... in any organization has the loss of one

man meant so much” (p. 55). Hillmer’s deft skill in curating these documents presents readers with a strong confirmation of Pearson’s praise.

A prolific scholar, Hillmer’s extensive background and expertise in 20th-century Canadian international policy offers a unique opportunity for a thorough and insightful guided tour of Skelton’s professional life in government.

Will Stos

Editor

Canadian Parliamentary Review

Tragedy in the Commons: Former Members of Parliament Speak Out About Canada’s Failing Democracy, by Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan, Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto, 2014, 288 p

It’s very easy to find writing that looks at the health of Canada’s parliamentary system, but up to now there has been very little that spoke to the parliamentarians who worked in the system. Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan seek to fill this gap with *Tragedy in the Commons*.

The book, a synthesis of the Samara Institute’s exit interviews with 80 former Members of Parliament, features an impressively broad group of politicians, including some who retired by choice and others who experienced electoral defeat, along with a former Prime Minister and Ministers from different governments, as well as backbenchers who left office still wet behind the ears or long in the tooth. Structurally, the book devotes chapters to the stages of a parliamentarian’s career: entering politics; the various parts of elected office; and,

ultimately, the return to civilian life. A concluding chapter offers thoughts on how to improve our governance from their experiences.

A few clear themes emerge. First, the authors remind us that being a Member of Parliament is a job without an instruction manual. Once elected, MPs find themselves dropped quickly into the deep end, with little orientation for a demanding job that has often brought them to a new city away from their families. There’s even little guidance for running a constituency office.

Second, those interviewed felt that they often had too little voice in the political system, subjugated by a top-down party system that limited their ability to act independently in the interests of their constituents. MPs could have been placed on committees for which they had no expertise or shuffled to another in mid-term; there were constant expectations to be a good soldier and partake in the

