

MR. DAVIN, M.P., A BIOGRAPHY OF NICHOLAS FLOOD DAVIN by C.B. Koester, Western Producer Prairie Books, Saskatoon, 1980, 238 p

A biography always tempts a critic to review its subject rather than the book, and when the subject is a Member of Parliament as lively and versatile as Nicholas Flood Davin, the temptation becomes almost overwhelming. Davin was elected as a Conservative in 1887, 1891, and 1896 for Assiniboia West, a sprawling territorial seat whose boundaries ran from west of Medicine Hat to east of Regina. In 1896 he squeaked by in one of the few elections settled by the deciding vote of the returning officer, and in 1900 he was defeated by 232 votes by Walter Scott, who in 1905 became the first premier of Saskatchewan. In 1901, apparently convinced he was a failure, Davin committed suicide in a bizarre episode that obliged him to buy a second revolver because the first one he purchased he considered defective.



Davin, as poet, journalist, lawyer, and legislator, was at fifty-eight no failure. Like a number of his fellow Celts who left Ireland for North America, he spoke eloquently and wrote well, often beautifully. Like many of his compatriots he battled alcoholism and in 1891, after a disastrous platform appearance, he took the pledge, publishing his decision among the classified advertisements of the *Regina Leader* (of which he was founder). Like many a member whose seat was far from

Ottawa, Davin had trouble keeping up with both his duties in the House and his constituents' needs back home. He not only had to fight for his nomination on occasion but, despite a steady growth in the votes he polled in four consecutive two-way fights, saw his share of the vote drop equally steadily until in 1900 it was, unfortunately for him, less than half.

But if Davin had trouble carrying his rapidly growing constituency with him, he was at the Ottawa end a spectacular, if controversial, performer. He was well-informed and perceptive, and saw himself as the champion of his distant constituents, at times to the detriment of his party. "He participated in the rough and tumble of parliamentary life," Mr. Koester reports, "with a gusto that probably endeared him to many of his colleagues on both sides of the House, though undoubtedly there were some who were repelled by it." He could also raise hackles by issues he selected: in 1890, for example, claiming that the commissioner of the North-West Mounted Police was too hard on both his men and the prairie settlers, Davin moved for a public inquiry; and in 1895 he moved for the enfranchisement of women on the same basis as men. On both occasions he was voted down in a House in which his party had a majority. When the party went into opposition in 1896 it made no fundamental difference to Davin: he was accustomed to opposing as a supporter of the government.

Perhaps for that reason he did not fulfil his ambition to be a cabinet minister, although he was considered an obvious choice when the Ministry of the Interior fell vacant in 1888. A portfolio might well have channeled his energies away from the exploitation of some of his talents, and that would have left posterity the poorer. At a time when, for example, judging from *Hansard*, the House contained far more members schooled in poetry than it does now, Davin was a standout. He could not only quote poetry at the drop of an order paper, but lauded on every possible occasion what is broadly called the arts. Praising the work of Archibald Lampman in the House one day Davin declared "... the life-blood of a people is

the genius that is put into books. There is the life-blood from which statesmen, and merchants, and lawyers, and others draw their nutriment, and that is the centre and source of all power." He carried his theme of "culture as the source of power" to audiences outside Parliament, and his belief in it was one of his most arresting characteristics.

The life of this remarkably appealing politician is told by Mr. Koester in an appealing book. As teacher, historian, Clerk of the Saskatchewan assembly and now the House of Commons, Mr. Koester has had unusual opportunities not just to read of politicians but to watch them under a variety of conditions, and his feeling both for Davin and the Parliament he so enjoyed shows clearly in his book. In lucid, graceful, prose, behind which lies a vast amount of research which is never obtrusive, Mr. Koester recounts the life of an active member who belongs among those who demonstrate session after session that the satisfaction a parliamentarian gets out of his work depends on what he brings to it. Mr. Davin, M.P., would, I think, have approved of *Mr. Davin, M.P.*

Norman Ward
Department of Economics
and Political Science
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon