



Recent Publications and Documents

THE GREAT PALACE: THE STORY OF PARLIAMENT by Christopher Jones, B.B.C., London 1983, 256 pp., and **PLAYING THE PALACE: A WESTMINSTER COLLECTION** selected by James Naughtie, Mainstream Publishing Co., Edinburgh, 1984, 209 pp.

Books on historical buildings often sound like a tour guide on cassettes interspersed with vague, dusty facts forgotten from Grade Eleven. The fact that a history of the Palace of Westminster shares the advantage of chronicling the often bizarre succession of British Monarchs and the development of parliamentary democracy is, for the average reader, a questionable advantage at best. It takes a particularly gifted writer to raise this genre above the level of coffee-table history and to import an accurate feeling for what Westminster stands for and what it means today.

Christopher Jones has given us a marvellous example of how this can be achieved, largely through his sparkling, ironic and anecdotal prose. Because the text accompanied the BBC-TV series on the subject and is written to be heard rather than read silently, the style echoes an immediate voice; Jones is actually interested in claiming the reader's ear while he relates the imaginary details of historic events in Westminster.

Jones' insistence on the flavour of detail throughout his account of the development of the British Parliament consistently inspires a potentially dull account with actualities of daily life in England during any given period:

When MPs moved into St. Stephen's in 1547... they sat in the chair stalls and made speeches at each other across the chancel of the chapel; they have been sitting in those same straight lines facing each other ever since.... It was the fashion in Tudor times for men to wear enormous pantaloons stuffed with wool and hair which simply could not be squeezed into the pews recently vacated by the monks. So... holes, two inches square, were cut in the walls for posts which would take scaffolding on which... they could lean.... [p. 55]

Perhaps Hollywood has accustomed us to an imaginary grandeur which, for centuries, the realities of

Westminster belied. Until the introduction of electricity in the 20th century, the greatest problems MPs faced were the lack of fresh air and adequate lighting. Coal fires and draughts designed to expel "unhealthy vapours" made the place hotter and stuffier than it already was, despite the first no-smoking law in Britain in 1723 forbidding the use of tobacco in the House: "It was all rather squalid. The place was dirty and it smelt; these were rats about it and it was grubby with bits and pieces of biscuits and fruits scattered around by Members." [p. 58]

The author's best chapters recount the fire of 1834 that destroyed most of Westminster, and the subsequent reconstruction of the New Palace. From the viewpoint of architectural and interior design, the new Palace of Westminster was by far the most ambitious undertaking ever completed in Britain, and Jones' account of the details of construction, the designer's problems and MPs' anxiety about the delays makes excellent reading. Included as well are remarkable photographs of the interiors of both Houses. Mr. Jones and the BBC obviously had access to parts of Westminster few people, save the Lords and MPs themselves, could ever have.

The final chapters are taken up with an explanation of the daily workings of Westminster as a modern parliament, including an historical sketch of the Press Gallery. The book is mercifully free of footnotes and includes a brief index.

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Before *Hansard* became the accurate record of debate it is now, words spoken in the British Parliament were jotted down as best they could by scribes, correspondents and journalists, and made public through journals and letters, broadsheets, newspapers, essays, diaries and magazines. The authors of these publications were some of the best prose writers in England — Dickens, Trollope, Dr. Johnson, and more recently, James Fenton of *The New Statesman*, Roy Hattersley of *The Listener* and Harry Boardman of the *Manchester Guardian*, among others. It is to all these sources that James Naughtie has gone for much of the material in his book, *Playing the Palace: A Westminster Collection*.

What we are given is more than a simple collection of snippets from great parliamentary speeches — anthologies of "greatest hits" of anything tend to be a little dull. Instead, we are invited to look down onto the floor of the House from the Press Gallery, and to read this selection of astonishing political oratory in conjunction with accounts by contemporary journalists of the day, who give to the proceedings a sense of immediate interest which the speeches out of context could not.

One example from recent times is the account of the Falklands debate that appeared in *The Scotsman* on 5 April 1982, after Argentina had invaded the Falkland Islands, and before Britain had retaliated. Other selections — from Elizabeth I, Cromwell, Wm. Pitt the Younger and Disraeli to Asquith, David Lloyd George, Churchill, Enoch Powell, Michael Foot and Bernadette Devlin, to name a few, are divided into 10, more or less random chapters: "Wars", "Four Spies", "A Government Falls" and so forth, prefaced by a short summary of the historical or political context of each. Among the stirring old chestnuts one expects are some surprisingly animated passages from lesser known Members. John Bright's speech against the Crimean War in 1855 is particularly passionate, as is Lord Byron's against a bill imposing capital punishment upon tradesmen who willingly destroy machines ("Is there not blood enough upon your penal code, that more must be poured forth to ascend to Heaven and testify against you?").

It all makes wonderful reading, especially in an age such as ours, when the level of political rhetoric is almost as low as the ability of the press to recognize and report it.

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SPEAKERS OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO 1867-1984, by Kathleen Finlay, Toronto, Legislative Library, Research and Information Services, 1985,

As explained in the forward of this book "little is known about the men

who have presided over the legislative life of the province" and this collection of biographies seeks to fill that gap. Unfortunately, the author has chosen to treat only "selective issues that have risen in connection with the Speaker's functions" and has paid "particular attention to the political careers of these men". The result is a book which presents brief sketches of thirty-one politicians who happened only incidentally to have served as Speakers.

John Stevenson, for instance, the first Speaker of the Ontario Legislative Assembly is described as a self-made man who had enjoyed success in lumber and shipping ventures before turning to politics as a moderate Reformer. Unexpectedly elected Speaker, he was apparently equal to the challenge, presiding over an often turbulent Legislature "with a mix of firmness and flexibility". The problems he had to face are mentioned only briefly, and do not seem exceptional, — the hostility between the government and opposition parties and the demands of Members seeking action on their private bills. Nothing is said specifically to explain how he handled himself as Speaker. His successor, Richard Scott, is noted for having much less success in the Chair, occupying the position for barely two weeks before resigning to accept an appointment as provincial Commissioner of Crown Lands. His resignation coincided with the collapse of the coalition administration of Sandfield Macdonald and gave rise to heated accusations of partisanship which did much to undermine the integrity of the Speakership. Those who followed, James Currie, Rupert Wells and Charles Clarke, were sufficiently competent to restore the prestige of the office. Again, however, the accounts about them do not adequately explain how they managed it. Currie is basically described as "popular", Wells "worthy" and Clarke "firm". And so the book continues.

Paradoxically, the ability of the author to write well adds to a sense of disappointment and frustration. The sketches of the Speakers are teasers and the reader is often left wanting to know more. The fact that so little is generally known about Ontario's past Speakers demands far more substantial treatment than the outlines presented in this book. If these Speakers are to be rescued from obscurity and oblivion, more information has to be presented about their tenure in the Chair.

Perhaps the most interesting anecdote concerns Speaker William Stewart. He is described as "a

colourful character with an often impetuous temperament, something of an enigma to those who knew him well". His tenure as Speaker began in 1944 and was cut short abruptly in 1947, during his second term, when confronted by the Minister of Highways over the trivial issue of guest seating in the Speaker's Gallery. Offended by the Minister's ridicule, Stewart felt that he could no longer command the respect of the House and resigned on the spot.

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**SO VERY NEAR: THE
POLITICAL MEMOIRS OF
DONALD M. FLEMING,
Volume One: The Rising Years;
Volume Two: The Summit
Years, McClelland and Stewart,
Toronto, 1985.**

The Honourable Donald Fleming P.C., Q.C., made a valuable contribution to Canada in the true spirit of dedicated public service. He began his public life as an alderman and rose to be the most senior minister in the Diefenbaker government. Three times he contested the leadership of the Progressive Conservative Party without success, obviously inspiring the title "So Very Near".

In Volume One, *The Rising Years*, Fleming takes the reader slowly through his early life, details the rivalry he had with classmates through law school, re-creates many debates he was involved in on Toronto City Council as an alderman, and finally takes long excerpts from Hansard to elucidate his work as a member of the Opposition and later Cabinet Minister in the 1957-58 minority Parliament.

In Volume Two: *The Summit Years*, he relies heavily on the public record; with impeccable accuracy and slavish attention to detail, he takes a full six hundred and forty-five pages to describe the five years he remained in the Cabinet.

Historians have always been skeptical of political memoirs and for good reason. Memoirs often rely on personal recollection at the expense of research, produce self-justification in place of reasoned arguments, and because of the time at which they were written, produce little new insight except into the character of their author.

It is clear from his introduction that Fleming was aware he was susceptible to this kind of criticism. His research

is obviously extensive and his arguments, in keeping with his character, are well reasoned. Unfortunately for the historian, to whom he seems to appeal for justification in having taken the liberty of putting pen to paper, Fleming does not add significant insight into the time period he reviews.

Fleming's devotion to historical accuracy, is in part responsible for his seriously flawed writing style. A lawyer by profession, the former Minister's attention to the minutia would suggest that he missed his calling as an accountant. Throughout *So Very Near* Fleming meticulously records, in the body of the work, the results of trivial votes in the House of Commons, and unrelentingly details the figures involved in many major government actions. Any editor of a business history would recommend that this type of information be relegated to footnotes. In a political memoir this detail should have been expurgated for the seemingly ignored cause of brevity.

In an autobiography it is expected that the author will provide the stage for a number of obscure curtain calls for those he or she has to "thank". But particularly in *The Rising Years*, whatever flow exists in the prose is interrupted by Fleming's attempt to add just one more name to the roster.

Donald Fleming, throughout his public life, was an honest, fair and hard-working public servant. In describing himself he comments in Volume One, "I had always avoided alcohol in any form, tobacco, tea, coffee. I was careful of what I ate, both in quality and quantity. I walked when I was not obliged by time or distance to ride. I daily practised the calisthenics that I had learned as a boy at the YMCA in Galt." As admirable and laudable as these character traits may be, they do not lend themselves to an exciting autobiography.

When telling stories about themselves, many statesmen have used, to advantage, a self depreciating sense of humour. Humour in any form would be a welcome addition to these one thousand three hundred and thirty-five pages.

Most political memoirs in Canada sell on the basis of the stature of the author rather than the lucidity of the prose or their great historical insight. Nevertheless the dry prose and questionable content of these Memoirs may well diminish the wide readership that would have been expected from a politician with the once strong following of Donald Fleming.

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