

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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