



Review: Biography

The man who lived his beliefs

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The middle of a vitriolic election campaign is the perfect time to read about Tommy Douglas. Tommy stood for enduring human ideals, something bigger than tax cuts, petty partisan advantage or his own ego. From the moment he entered politics in the Great Depression until he left 45 years later, Douglas battled fearlessly, and surprisingly successfully, for the public good against private greed.

As Vincent Lam's biography shows, "battled" was the word. Douglas first ran for Parliament in Weyburn, Sask. His opponent sent drunken thugs to break up his speech. When they rushed the stage, the genial Baptist minister and former Manitoba lightweight boxing champ smashed the water jug on the table and yelled, "The first one gets this in the face!"

A very different image from the end of his career evokes the patriarch chosen "the greatest Canadian" in a 2004 CBC television poll. Delivering his last speech to a New Democratic Party convention, a rousing appeal to the faithful to build a better world, Douglas was cheered wildly for five minutes. The frail 79-year-old stood on a table to hush the crowd, yet, Lam recounts, "for 23 minutes, the outpouring of joy, gratitude, and admiration continued. Those who were there knew that Douglas had lived his beliefs, and they loved him for it."

Lam, the Giller Prize-winning author of short fiction who also happens to be a physician, gives Douglas's incomparable career a thoughtful, balanced, lucid assessment. Lam clearly feels a strong affinity for Tommy – not only for his innovative achievements in health care, but his compassion, decency and moral courage, all too rare in politics.

Lam fleshes out Tommy's egalitarian independence of mind, a gift from his Scottish working-class parents distilled from the poetry of Burns. He astutely documents formative incidents in Douglas's youth: nearly losing a leg from a bone infection until a leading surgeon offered to treat it for free; seeing the RCMP kill a protestor in the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike. Later came the metamorphosis from preacher to CCF MP. Challenged to stick to the pulpit, Douglas believed that building the Kingdom of God on Earth required radical change.

Lam puts Tommy's 17 years as premier of Saskatchewan at the heart of the book. After ushering in a blizzard of reforms to protect farm families from the eastern banks, Douglas began his long, arduous battle to create the first universal health-care system in North America. He faced the bitter animosity of the Saskatchewan medical establishment – and eventually the Canadian and American establishments, who paraded the usual red herrings about “government dictatorship.”

To this point, Lam has largely let his subject speak for him. But his book takes on fresh energy when he expresses his personal convictions. Acknowledging the debt owed to prime ministers Diefenbaker and Pearson and Justice Emmett Hall as godfathers of Medicare, Lam is clear that Douglas is its father. If he hadn't been such a tough, stubborn, occasionally mean old cuss, staring down striking doctors and hostile corporations and news media, Canadians would still have a broken, inequitable system like the Americans.

Lam is profoundly proud that the basic principle of our healthcare system, “that all human lives have equal value,” is a cornerstone of Canadian civilization. He chides those who feel embarrassed that a social program has become a major part of our national identity. By making Medicare a reality in Saskatchewan, Douglas proved it could work throughout Canada, a deep conceptual shift that fundamentally improved our quality of life. As Tommy's father would have put it, “Ye've done nae bad.”

In a telling postscript, Lam gets angry with the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) for continuing to this day to block full public access to security files compiled on Douglas when he was considered a dangerous radical, even a communist. It would tickle Tommy to know he can still threaten the powers that be.

Roy MacSkimming is the author of the prime ministerial novels Macdonald and Laurier in Love.

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