

Barbara Kay: New Pearson book. Good. Short.

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Want to “discover what it means to be Canadian?” asks a publishing blurb for a series of biographies on influential Canadians.

Certainly, if it doesn't take too much time. I'm all for shining more light on my inner Canadian, but can we make it snappy? No time for obese, definitive history books and biographies. Like you, I'm busy.

Happily for us, the Extraordinary Canadians series has come along to provide attention-deficient Canadians with their culture in a capsule.

Last April, Penguin Group (Canada) committed itself to an ambitious three-year publication project, a series of eighteen biographies portraying twenty past (but not too past) political and cultural giants who have shaped the modern Canadian character. There are some women — Emily Carr, Nellie McClung, Lucy Maud Montgomery — but mostly it's Dead White Males.

Amongst them: Pierre Elliott Trudeau, Mordecai Richler, Glenn Gould and Marshall McLuhan. Rocket Richard and William Lyon Mackenzie King didn't make the cut, but that's how it is with series: You have to stop somewhere.

Series editor John Ralston Saul's goal was, in addition to helping us discover our Canadianness, to showcase Canadians who “[have] changed you.” Fair enough. Richard merely thrilled us and King was craz- um, King didn't change us.

Every book in *Extraordinary Canadians* is deliciously slim. Authors were constrained to 40,000 words, a *Weight Watchers* salad instead of the typical groaning board set out by academics with unlimited appetite for their subject.

For fresh perspectives and demotic appeal, Mr. Saul cleverly paired authors with subjects outside their usual purview. Thus, international relations guru Margaret MacMillan was assigned the biography of humorist Stephen Leacock, while GG-award-winning novelist Nino Ricci was given Pierre Elliott Trudeau.

I've just read the latest title: *Lester B. Pearson*, by Carleton University journalism prof and Ottawa Citizen columnist, Andrew Cohen. Good choice. Professionally inured to iron word constraints, Cohen cuts to the thematic chase in crisp, racy prose with a judicious eye for quotations and anecdotes that support his claims. He genuinely likes his subject and it shows.

By the end (less than a day's read), I couldn't agree with Cohen that Pearson was "great." But I no longer think of the bow-tied, bowler-hatted, lisp-ing Pearson as bland or boring. His life, to my surprise, was a page-turner.

"Mike" Pearson was for many years the world's best-known Canadian and our first home-grown Canadian nationalist prime minister. His fingerprints are all over the institutions and symbols that define us: the flag, Medicare, the Canada Pension Plan, the Canada Assistance Plan and the Guaranteed Income Supplement.

It is thanks to Pearson that we have a wide-open immigration policy, a liberalized criminal code and — he didn't invent it, but he patriated it — our beloved peacekeeping approach to military adventurism.

Official bilingualism? Pearson. Unified armed forces, federal labour code, the Auto Pact and the Status of Women Council? Pearson. And it was Pearson who liberalized laws around divorce and abortion. He also instituted the Order of Canada.

What's more, he did all this without running a deficit and even more impressively, without ever enjoying a majority government. Take heart and carry on, Mr. Harper.

There's no free lunch. The virtue of brevity in a biography also means that you're more tantalized than satisfied regarding the subject's personal life. How did he slough off his strict religious upbringing so easily? Why, in London before the war, was he so blind to the Nazi threat?

Pearson was an odd duck — an appropriate image since, while his forward passage seemed aimless ("things just happened," he reflected), below the surface he was paddling vigorously in the right circles to curry favour. Not a risk-taker ("He had no appetite for lost causes"), he always bobbed to the political surface after every dunking.

He could and did turn his hand to any number of occupations with good cheer, social flexibility, patience and a will to succeed. Pearson was by turns athlete, sausage maker, pilot, scholar, UN bigwig, diplomat and politician. Also husband, father and adulterous lover.

Above all, he was lucky (“fortune’s child”) — helpful family connections, never sick, a “good war” — but he chivvied luck along: “Pearson was like the goaltender who ... doesn’t always know where the puck is, [but] he senses where it is likely to go.” When offers came in, “he knew when to say yes and when to say no.”

Lots more I could say — like would it have killed the editors to add an index, so crucial to the book’s use for students, not to mention a few photographs? — but, as journalist, know verbal economy secret to happy readership. Good book. Series good idea.

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