

True Patriot
The Life of Brooke Claxton
1898-1960

David ay Bercuson. *True Patriot: The Life of Brooke Claxton 1898-1960* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994) 363 pages, \$35.00.

Political biography has become something of a lost art within the Canadian historical profession. It has suffered from the misfortune of combining the two types of history whose efficacy has been most challenged in recent years within the field. Once a staple of Canadian historiography, it has been relegated to the backwater. This is not to say that the "great man" approach to the study of the past was without shortcomings. As that term itself implies, it was not. But in harping on the inadequacies of political biography and forgetting how riveting it can be when done properly, the baby has been thrown out with the bathwater.

Thankfully, for those who recall the sheer joy in reading Creighton's *Macdonald or Careless' Brown*, there remain some scholars willing to try to maintain the high standards and tradition such classics established for the genre. David Bercuson is one, and in *True Patriot* he succeeds admirably in doing just that.

This is a well-written and exhaustively researched study of an important individual who wielded power and exerted influence within the highest government circles. It is the tale of "a doer, not a thinker" (p.63) whose contributions to establishing the CBC, building the welfare state, creating the modern Canadian military, and setting up the Canada Council are a testament to "the power of his intellect, the

drive of his will, . . . his incredible energy, and his organizational skill." (p.5)

But it is also the story of a man: his voyage from adolescence to adulthood, his inner battles with depression, and his relationships with father, wife and children. Bercuson's ability to construct a portrait of Claxton based on both his public and private lives is perhaps the book's main forte. Readers of this journal will be particularly interested in the author's description of Claxton's military service with the 10th Canadian Siege Battery in France during 1918, the repugnance for war it produced in him, and the key effect it had in turning him into an ardent Canadian nationalist, his "only real ideology." (p.67) Claxton was awarded a Distinguished Conduct Medal and eventually became the highest-ranking NCO in his unit.

As the book unfolds, a picture emerges of a very complex man. At the same time that "intelligence, imagination, and a willingness to work," were his strengths, (p. 126) a tendency to "be extremely impatient, intolerant, and judgmental with those he either disagreed with or thought of as less principled than he," proved a weakness, (p.95) As Bercuson so eloquently puts it,

by his own design, [Claxton] came to possess two personae: one for the world, which was ebullient, fun-loving, vigorous, active, and a believer in and leader of causes; and an inner man who experienced the same self-doubt as other mortals but who also knew despair and loneliness. This inner man could be extraordinarily sensitive and empathetic, but few people were ever to know that. That struggle of the one persona

for mastery over the other helped determine the course of Brooke Claxton's career and his personal life. (p.43)

The author never loses sight of the interrelationship between personality and policy.

It is in the examination of Claxton's public service where his "overriding . . . desire to be useful to his country" (p.287) shines through. Those attracted to military history will especially enjoy Bercuson's treatment of Claxton's tenure as Minister of National Defence from 1946 to 1954. The author discusses the major part he played in shaping Canadian defence policy through the early years of the Cold War, including Canada's role in NATO, laying the foundation for joint North American defence with the United States, participation in the Korean Conflict, and particularly his efforts at rebuilding and reorganizing the nation's armed forces in the immediate post-World War II period which saw their largest peacetime mobilization ever.

Here, too, the book's central strengths are represented. Bercuson tackles controversial historiographical debates head on. Some historians have portrayed Claxton as a budget slasher who at Prime Minister Mackenzie King's command willingly initiated deep cuts in defence spending. Bercuson demonstrates convincingly that Claxton "bitterly resisted" the wholesale gutting of his ministry's resources (pp. 166-169). Oddly enough, though, the author does not explicitly situate his interpretation of Claxton's realistic approach to the Canadian-American defence relationship (pp.190, 289-290) within the academic debate over the merits of post-war Liberal policy toward the United States.

Bercuson also delivers on the promise made in the Preface to tell Claxton's story "warts and all." (p.xii) This, of course, is precisely what good biography should do and Bercuson does not disappoint. The book's tone is generally sympathetic and the author displays great admiration for Claxton's accomplishments; these he stresses in a positive manner, and rightly so. However, Bercuson does not hesitate to find fault when criticism is warranted; there are few sacred cows when it comes to both character and policy failings.

For example, Bercuson notes how Claxton's successful opposition to Canadian participation in the Berlin airlift of 1948 not only "ignored the basic fact . . . that if war broke out over Berlin, Canada would be in it up to its neck," but also "flew in the face of everything that he had believed in since the mid-1930s . . . collective security short of war . . . [and] standing up to a power that . . . was expansionist and inherently aggressive." Bercuson concludes that Claxton "clearly missed the import of the Allied airlift and the possible consequences of its failure." He speculates that Claxton might have believed that taking the same attitude on the subject as Mackenzie King would improve his prospects for landing the long-coveted External Affairs portfolio, (p. 197-9) Claxton's intense ambition sometimes got the better of him.

Bercuson is similarly candid regarding Claxton's reluctance to see Canada involved in the Korean War. "When Claxton examined this issue from the perspective of cold military logic, he concluded that Canada should avoid entanglement in Korea. But [as a close friend] pointed out, this was one of those circumstances 'in which cold logic [could not] be the

controlling factor.'" (p.212)

Here and elsewhere, Bercuson does well in explaining the motivations behind Claxton's actions; he recognizes the tension, inconsistency, and even contradiction which sometimes existed within them. While "Claxton's faith was his liberalism," he was very much "the pragmatic liberal." (p.8) Yet, one particular area might have been fleshed out more fully. Prior to taking on the reins at National Defence, Claxton was Minister of National Health and Welfare from 1944-46. There he became "one of the architects of the Canadian welfare state." (p.4) He accepted the National Defence portfolio only after being persuaded by Mackenzie King that so long as the armed forces were eating up such a large portion of the budget the social reforms he championed would never be implemented, (p. 151) Yet, as Bercuson emphasizes, Claxton proved very protective of his new ministry's turf, even in the face of pleas from his successor at Health and Welfare, Paul Martin, who "pointed out, correctly, that 'Canada would be unable to continue the heavy expenditures which modern defence programs entailed and at the same time expand social services.'" (p.205) Bercuson acknowledges that Claxton's "constant struggle for defence dollars made him less sympathetic to welfare spending," (p.8) but what Claxton thought about the relationship between his work at both ministries—and the basic incompatibility of his achievements while heading each of them—is not fully clear.

When one also considers Claxton's apparent modification of other deeply-held views like those regarding collective security mentioned above, the author's contention that his subject's "goals and objectives for himself and for

his country remained surprisingly constant..." (p.8) becomes somewhat problematic. It is here, perhaps, that the absence of much of the correspondence—destroyed after his death—between Claxton and his wife, in whom he confided his deepest feelings, is most regrettable for what light it might have shed on these matters.

Readers should also bear in mind that permeating Bercuson's appraisal of Claxton is his agreement with what Claxton fundamentally believed in and fought for. Bercuson concludes that one of Claxton's most serious sins was sharing the Liberals' belief that "their party was Canada's only hope and that preserving it in government was a truly sacred national trust." This was "a peculiarly arrogant way of thinking," the author concedes, "but looking at the record of Canada's federal governments since 1957 does far more to uphold that belief than to undermine it." (p.288) Not everyone would agree with this assessment of Liberal centralization. The author's additional claim that "the belief of Claxton and his colleagues that this country needed effective national government is only confirmed by the chaos that has attended the transformation of a once-united Canada into a 'community of shopping centres . . .'" (p.289), likewise injects an underlying bias into an otherwise balanced account. How much Claxton himself—"a true party man" (p. 121)—might have contributed to those long-term reasons for the Liberal Party's defeat in 1957 which he identified at the time (p.281) remains unclear as well.

In the end, though, there is much more to recommend than to criticize about this book. In retrieving Brooke Claxton from "a crack in history" (p.4) and

recounting his many impressive achievements in the cause of Canadian unity and the country which he loved, David Bercuson builds a persuasive case for why "one of the most interesting Canadians of the twentieth century" (p.xi) should be remembered by a generation that does not seem as sure as he was of what binds them together.

David A. Lenarcic
Wilfrid Laurier University