

PEOPLE, POLITICS, AND PURPOSE

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INTRODUCTION

Greg Donaghy and P. Whitney Lackenbauer

John English's remarkable breadth of scholarly interest and knowledge, his mastery of archival research, and his ability to cast ideas in evocative, readable prose have made this bestselling author the pre-eminent Canadian political biographer of the last half-century. As an editor of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* during some of its most challenging times and an inspiration behind the UBC Press's political history series, English has championed the form. He was first drawn to the biographer's craft as a young historian – his biography of Sir Robert Borden was published in 1977 – and no contemporary Canadian historian has done more to deepen our understanding of Canadian prime ministers. His landmark biographies of Lester B. Pearson and Pierre Elliott Trudeau, products of a mature and seasoned mind, stand as cornerstones of Canadian historiography.

The chapters in this volume offer insights into Canada's place in the world, illuminate the roles and reputations of diverse political actors, and stimulate fresh thinking about the nature and value of political biography. The authors' critical perspectives do not promote a return to the "great man theory" that long animated political biography but celebrate the value of analyzing both macro- and microdynamics toward a better understanding of Canada's past. The essays in this book are reflections by historians on historical actors engaged in and affected by the politics around them.

* * *

John English came to the genre of political history as an undergraduate student at the University of Waterloo (near his hometown of Plattsville, Ontario), where he completed a joint major in history and political science. He ventured to Harvard University with a Woodrow Wilson scholarship in history to pursue his graduate studies, where he switched his earlier plans for a project in German or British history to a study on Robert Borden and political management. By the time he completed his PhD in 1973, he had returned to teach at Waterloo, where he published his first books: a short biography of Arthur Meighen; a longer overview of Robert Borden; and a ground-breaking analysis of the Conservatives and the party system.¹ Over the next decade, while coauthoring a lively two-volume survey of twentieth-century Canadian history,² English produced influential articles and chapters on Canadian political history and foreign policy. If the discipline of history in Canada was abdicating ground to political scientists on historical topics,³ English was certainly not part of this trend. As a board member and then coeditor of the *Canadian Historical Review*, from 1983 to 1989, he also encouraged increasingly diverse and inclusive forms of Canadian history. While others became embroiled in so-called history wars, English remained a colleague whose wide networks – spanning beyond history and indeed beyond the academy – included friends on all sides.

English's research on Lester B. Pearson began with a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada grant with his friend Robert Bothwell to publish a selection of Pearson's papers. When that book project fell through, the former prime minister's son, Geoffrey, reminded English that his father needed a biography. English started working on it in earnest in 1983, with a Killam grant from 1985 to 1987 enabling him to capitalize on nearly unfettered access to the Pearson papers at the National Archives of Canada (many of which are now closed). When the first volume covering Pearson's life from 1897 to 1948 appeared in 1989,⁴ it drew applause from professional historians and literary critics alike. Accolades included the Canadian Authors Association Literary Award for Non-Fiction, the J.W. Dafoe Prize for best Canadian book on Canadian affairs, and the Sir John A. Macdonald Prize of the Canadian Historical Association. He managed to complete the second volume while teaching, presiding over the Canadian Institute for International Affairs, and being actively involved in Liberal

politics. Soon after the publication of *The Worldly Years* in 1993,⁵ English was elected as the Liberal Party member of Parliament for the riding of Kitchener. Over the next four years, his roles included parliamentary secretary to the president of the Privy Council, minister of intergovernmental affairs and minister responsible for public service renewal; vice-chair of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade; chair of the Subcommittee on Sustainable Human Development; and vice-president of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe – Parliamentary Assembly. The long-time observer of politics had become a direct participant.

After completing his term as MP in 1997, English returned to university life. To his students, he was a deeply committed teacher and mentor held in the highest esteem. He brought to the classroom an unrivalled knowledge of Canadian politics and history, which he situated effortlessly in the broader historiography on international relations. His undergraduate lectures, always delivered without notes, started at a gentle pace as he jotted an outline on the chalkboard and would rise to a crescendo with a few minutes left in class when, Lackenbauer recalls, the students had to feverishly scribble notes to record the denouement of that day's subject. English also had "enormous respect for different sides," his former PhD student Stephen Azzi explained. "Conservative students might have feared taking a course from a partisan Liberal, but they quickly discovered that they had nothing to worry about."⁶ The intellectual climate in the seminar room was set by argumentation and debate, rooted in historical evidence, with the perspicacious professor offering contrary interpretations when needed to foster a more judicious appraisal.

As a supervisor, English never imposed his ideas, instead encouraging students to find their own way. He returned drafts quickly, his written comments penetrating and incisive. He would uncover factual errors, flaws in analysis, and failures to consider other arguments. In a few words he would capture the strengths and weaknesses of a thesis chapter. His knowledge of the academic literature, which ranged far beyond his area of speciality, was astounding. Accordingly, meetings were highly rewarding – and much anticipated. "Visiting him in his office was a challenge, because a line of students was always waiting for him," Azzi recalled. "John was in high demand because he was a scintillating conversationalist: intelligent,

compassionate, and humorous, always willing to share the latest gossip from Queen's Park or Parliament Hill."⁷

While teaching, English also held a bevy of important assignments for the federal government (which John Milloy describes in his concluding reflections to this book). He worked as a special advisor to the Canadian minister of foreign affairs on landmines, as principal reviewer of the mandate and future roles of the National Library and National Archives of Canada, as chair of the board of the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the Canadian War Museum, and as special envoy promoting Canada's bid for a seat on the UN Security Council. In 2001, he was seconded from the University of Waterloo to serve as the founding executive director of the Centre for International Governance Innovation and oversaw Canada's largest think tank on international affairs for the next eight years. Concurrent with these leadership responsibilities, he also researched his next major project: the official biography of Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau. He had been approached by Jim Coutts (whom English knew from his Harvard days) and received permission to peruse the Trudeau papers at Library and Archives Canada. Finding them more extensive than any prime minister's papers except William Lyon Mackenzie King's, of excellent quality, and well organized, English accepted and started his research in 2002.

Four years later, English published the first volume of his biography of Pierre Trudeau⁸ and became editor of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (*DCB*). Both solidified his reputation as the foremost historical biographer in Canada. *Citizen of the World* won the University of British Columbia Canadian Biography Prize for best Canadian biography, the [Amazon.ca](https://www.amazon.ca) award for best biography, and the Dafoe Prize, and was a finalist for the Charles Taylor Prize for Literary Non-Fiction, the Shaughnessy Cohen Prize for Political Writing, and the Donald Smiley Prize of the Canadian Political Science Association. The second volume of the Trudeau biography, *Just Watch Me*, garnered more acclaim, including another Dafoe Prize.⁹ "Brilliant, so perceptive about Trudeau, so well informed on the context, so beautifully written," extolled the distinguished historian Ramsay Cook (a former general editor of the *DCB*).¹⁰

English's institutional leadership continued after his retirement from the University of Waterloo, in 2009. He served as the founding director of the Bill Graham Centre for Contemporary International History at Trinity

College from 2013 to 2019, before turning the reins over to his former student Greg Donaghy. English continues to serve as an advisory board member for the Trudeau Centre for Peace, Conflict and Justice, and remains a sage mentor, trusted advisor, and cherished friend to many scholars, politicians, and pundits across our country.

* * *

Biography flourished in nineteenth-century Canada, as measured by production *and* consumption. Readers looked for inspiration and exemplars, and biographers – British and American, supplemented by translations from Europe – supplied the need. Great men and Florence Nightingale predominated. But “the pages of Canadian history are [also] rich in picturesque and striking figures about whom cluster the great events in the evolution of our national institutions,” W.J. Karr wrote in introducing a volume of vignettes, which “through the stories of the lives of these notable men and women, one may obtain ... a clear and comprehensive grasp of the history of their times.”¹¹ Discussing Canadian biography in 1980, Robert Craig Brown noted that the earliest examples generally conformed to simple hagiography, “tendentious and didactic tomes, unburdened by a respect for evidence, in which heroes and heroines could do no wrong.”¹² Theirs were “exemplary lives” for a generation that craved heroism, especially if infused with contemporary versions of morality – and that advanced thought, as the writers interpreted it.

The subsequent “life and times” form of biography, exemplified in the Canadian canon by O.D. Skelton’s graceful *Life and Letters of Sir Wilfrid Laurier* (1921),¹³ adopted more assiduous research and an increasingly scholarly tone about the lives of public men. But Skelton demonstrated a fervent commitment to both Laurier the man and the liberal nationalist project that he espoused,¹⁴ narrating the life of his central figure through the political and economic challenges that his “hero” had to overcome. Unlike English’s work, however, the life and times biographers emphasized circumstance over “portraiture of character.”¹⁵ Contradictions in, unsavoury aspects of, and confusing elements about a subject’s life were either downplayed or suppressed. Furthermore, practitioners of this form only partially grappled with core questions about the relationships between individuals in specific sociocultural and political environments, their autonomy and

agency to shape their world, and the influences on the development of personality that shape a person's life.¹⁶

Canadian political biography in the 1950s and early 1960s sought to correct this imbalance between character and circumstance, recreating the lives of politicians to reveal their hopes, intentions, and motivations as embodiments of the nation itself.¹⁷ "In a biography, as in a novel," Donald Creighton suggested, history does not wallow "in generalities and abstractions" but in "a central, main character, a set of subordinate characters, and a series of particular situations."¹⁸ Published in 1952 and 1955, Creighton's epic two-volume biography of John A. Macdonald embodied both meticulous research and elegant writing that drew on the techniques of fiction. In so doing, biographer Donald Wright noted that Creighton "put thoughts into Macdonald's head," invented dialogue, and imagined scenes to evoke emotion in his reader.¹⁹ Through Creighton's biography, Carl Berger observed, "an entire age and its political history were not merely ordered around Macdonald, but ... readers saw the whole scene through his eyes alone."²⁰

The George Brown who emerged in J.M.S. Careless's magisterial biography saw the same historical events rather differently from Creighton's Macdonald,²¹ but it was not because the biographers disputed the facts. It was their selection and imaginative configuration of the evidence, their interpretation and fashioning of a political narrative that explained their distinct portrayals of their subjects and, by extension, of nineteenth-century Canada. As historian Penny Bryden explains in her recent reflection on the changing shape of English Canadian political history, most historians in the first seven decades of the twentieth century were hedgehogs committed to knowing "one big thing" and telling "a single story" – what twenty-first century scholars might label "empire," "nation building," or "compromise."²² Most of the "great man" or heroic biographies produced in the three decades after the Second World War followed one of these linear trajectories, tracing stories from beginning to end – often with a tidy teleological arc – through the lives of their chosen protagonist.

As intellectual, labour, business, social, and women's and gender historians broadened and deepened Canadian historiography from the 1960s onward, their theoretical and methodological focus on structures left little room for individual character as a fundamental political determinant. "In

fairness.³¹ A widening array of professional and nonprofessional historians have typically embraced the detached, objective/academic style of factual narrative to ground their interpretations, rather than more dramatic or expressive forms.³² (Fittingly, John English – a long-time reader of and contributor to the *DCB* – became general editor from 2006 to 2013, during which time the *DCB* was recognized with the Governor General’s History Award for Popular Media: The Pierre Berton Award.³³)

The *DCB* also offers strong insight into broader Canadian historical currents and how these have carried the genre of political biography. As new generations of historians expanded their gaze to encompass a more diverse cast of political actors – from woman suffragists and clergy to Indigenous leaders and civil service mandarins – the *DCB* became increasingly diverse in subject matter, sources, and styles of writing.³⁴ Labour and social historians brought their perspectives to political biography, contributing entries (and books) on prominent union leaders, progressive reformers, and entrepreneurs. Despite a selection bias toward men with public profiles (and with ample primary sources to back their stories), biographies of more than five hundred women have appeared in the *DCB*, most prominently in those volumes covering the twentieth century.³⁵ “Without ever setting out to do anything but tell one story as he or she saw fit,” Frances Halpenny observes, “each and every author [who has contributed to the *DCB*] has added a segment to what now constitutes a monumental yet pulsing biography of Canada.”³⁶ The *DCB* is not just a monument to Canadian history; its pages also reveal a who’s who of many of Canada’s finest scholars.

The rising tide of regionalism in Canadian political studies also brought a surge of biographies of provincial politicians. For example, when a group of prominent Toronto-based historians established the Ontario Historical Studies Series in the early 1970s, they lamented how “Ontario has many fine historians, but much of their work has been focused on national themes.”³⁷ A series of biographies of Ontario premiers sought to capture the province’s distinctive history, as did similar books by political historians across the country. Thomas Flanagan’s reassessment of Louis Riel, Hugh Dempsey’s biographies of Crowfoot (Isapo-muxika), Red Crow (Mékaisto), and Big Bear (Mistahimaskwa), and Murray Dobbin’s profile of Jim Brady and Malcolm Norris also raised the profile of Indigenous political leaders who shaped the course of their people – and of modern Canada.³⁸

While treatments of prime ministers and other federal politicians incorporated new historiographical currents, H. Blair Neatby noted in 1993 that their biographers continued to write in prose deliberately crafted to appeal to nonacademic audiences – a contrast from most academic historians who now published specialized studies for other scholars.³⁹ John English's masterful two-volume biography on Lester Pearson – *Shadow of Heaven* (1989) and *The Worldly Years* (1993) – blurred the lines between the public and private person, carefully analyzing political events throughout Pearson's life while situating these in sophisticated sociocultural contexts. Academic and nonacademic audiences, as well as various national award committees, approved.⁴⁰

Since then, an increasingly diverse array of subjects associated with political history have invited changes in scope and methodology. In their introduction to a 2010 special issue of the *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* on “The Biographical (Re)Turn,” Adele Perry and Brian Lewis note how “renewed interest in the individual and in agency” has revitalized “the contextualized biography as an entry-point to a study of a broader world.”⁴¹ By embracing subjectivities, identity construction, and “performances” of self, however, biographers can claim a place in “restoring a sense of human agency to the historical process.”⁴² After all, as Peter Waite emphasized, without humans, there “are no forces; there are no movements; there are no trends. Different people may behave differently as individuals, groups, or crowds; but ... they are all human.”⁴³

The breadth of academics writing historical biography also reinforces that it is hardly a genre of “disrepute.”⁴⁴ Methodological and theoretical diversity, coupled with a broadening and deepening of the subject areas (and thus the range of actors), has fragmented traditional national political narratives and produced a “new political history” that expands beyond the study of “great men,” “great events,” and state politics.⁴⁵ Accordingly, traditional political biography now coexists alongside more experimental forms featuring a rich plurality of approaches, themes, and subjects. “There is no reason why biography cannot serve as a legitimate way to look carefully at individual and collective lives, great and laboring men, or maids and duchesses,” British historian Lucy Riall observes. “The structure of a life may be remembered and recounted as a sketch or in fragments, or as a chronological narrative with origin, purpose, or end, or as some combination of all these forms.”⁴⁶

Few Canadian historians writing in the genre have proven willing to dispense with conventional considerations of chronology, consistent with Robert Rotberg's insistence that "biographical treatments must never be divorced from their temporal or spatial contexts. Choice, and rational action, occurs only within such a framework."⁴⁷ Even this logic, however, cannot reveal the full inner life of a subject. As John English noted in the introduction to his first volume on Pearson, *Shadow of Heaven*:

Lester Pearson has not been easy to know. He had a Victorian reserve that made revelation about one's private life difficult. In writing this biography, especially on those occasions when I had to divine Pearson's private thoughts and motives, I often recalled Virginia Woolf's comment about her sighting of a kingfisher on a cold September day that awakened a special feeling in her. No biographer, she rightly warned, could ever know that important fact about her life in the late summer of 1926 and no biographer should pretend to do so.⁴⁸

As such, the biographer bears a heavy burden of creative responsibility when discerning and finding motives for their subject's decisions and actions – even if this entails reinventing as well as reconstructing the past.⁴⁹

Ged Martin asked in 1992: "Have we passed from an era of heroic biography into an era more interested in the archaeology of humbler lives?"⁵⁰ Perhaps not, as traditional forms of heroic biography have continued to thrive in Canada as elsewhere.⁵¹ Nonetheless, historians increasingly blend careful archival research and methodological analysis of secondary sources with oral histories and other sources to weave together political and cultural themes into what some commentators describe as "the new biography."⁵² Accordingly, the new political biography in Canada also reflects the shift in political history toward multidimensional approaches that are less teleological or certain, embrace complexity, and are expected to "consider more complicated ways of engaging individual lives and nation states."⁵³

Reappraisals of the life and times of Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau reflect the ongoing appeal of political biography in Canada, both in their contributions to historiography and in book sales. Although Trudeau was the subject of various biographies while in office and in retirement⁵⁴ (as well as a thin autobiography⁵⁵), a deluge of writings on his intellectual

influences, ideological predilections, political and cultural appeal, and contributions to Canada have appeared since his death in 2000, renewing vigorous debate about his legacies.⁵⁶

English, as official biographer, enjoyed unfettered access to Trudeau's personal papers, leading him to dramatically revise our understandings of the prime minister's early life. "In reading Trudeau's own words, I came to realize that the seeming contradictions in his life were more often consistencies," English explained.⁵⁷ Trudeau's papers revealed youthful adherence to socially conservative Catholic and radical separatist ideas that he avoided in his memoirs – ideas expunged through education in the United States, Britain, and France. Unlike many earlier prime ministerial biographies, English emphasizes how intellectuals around Trudeau influenced his professional life, shaping his ideas and the constitutional, economic, foreign, and domestic policies that he promoted.⁵⁸ By carefully situating Trudeau in Quebec society of the 1930s–40s and then broader international currents, English demonstrates how, at various stages of life, the intellectual-cum-politician reflected the world of ideas around him. Trudeau's letters to his mother and female friends provide insight into the private side of a person who, English reveals, always anticipated a life in politics. The Trudeau that emerges "is a far more complex, conflicted, and challenging character than we have ever known before."⁵⁹ In engaging this complexity, "English is even-handed, rarely praising, blaming or psychologizing, but he explains and invokes all the different views on the events recounted," William Johnson noted in a *Globe and Mail* review. "And it's a good read."⁶⁰ Again, book prize committees agreed.⁶¹

English's biographies of Pearson and Trudeau affirm how recent political biography in Canada is informed by scholarship from the social sciences but retains its close affinity with literature in its narrative form and content. "Biography . . . is a branch of history but it is not the same thing as history," Carl Berger asserts. "History deals in generalizations about groups, institutions, and movements in time and is more than a mosaic of lives. Biography deals with the particularities of a human being and seeks to simulate, through narrative, an individual's life."⁶² This categorical statement draws a clear distinction between history and biography, although vigorous debate continues about whether biography should be considered a genre distinct from history, an approach to it, or a field within it.⁶³ Whatever the verdict,

the biographer's intent is to furnish a sophisticated view of the role of individuals, perceptions of them, and the people, movements, and forces that influenced them.

"Historians are not interested in simply charting the course of individual lives," American historian David Nasaw argues, "but in examining those lives in a dialectical relationship to the multiple social, political, and cultural worlds they inhabit and give meaning to."⁶⁴ The chapters in this book not only reveal how individuals have contributed to the shaping of Canadian history, but also how they have been shaped in and shaped by particular historical, political, and sociocultural contexts.

* * *

"Biography is the most common form of history," English and Robert Bothwell observe in their foreword to a recent monograph in the field. "Some subjects anticipate their immortality and compose their own versions of their lives."⁶⁵ The opening chapter of this collection, by historians Bothwell and Norman Hillmer, opens up an important question in this collection: What do memoirs and diaries contribute to understanding Canada's history? While their focus remains autobiography, the chapter embraces the field of life-writing, which includes diaries, as means of contextualizing the writing of history. Their chapter explores the numerous published and unpublished texts of Canada's many diplomatic autobiographers, suggesting that these sources personalize history for the reader and make use of the reader's understanding of others' personal traits as a bridge to the unfamiliar worlds of the past.

Personal diaries, Bothwell and Hillmer argue, "act, like memoirs, as self-promotion, self-justification, or self-explanation – sometimes all three – but they have the advantage of not having travelled through the filter of too much reflection." Beginning with the exceptionally literate group of diplomats that staffed the Department of External Affairs in the 1920s, Canada's foreign service officers stand out as sharp observers of the country's growing independence. Despite their inherent limitations, the products of ego and spite, their memoirs and autobiographies add vital nuance to our historical narratives, especially with their insights into the personalities and personal relationships that shaped policy. Locating their own experiences within the broad currents of contemporaneous national and international history,

these writers facilitate a deeper comprehension of Canada's international history.

While diaries and autobiography embody how people portray themselves, biographers and historians apply their own narrative devices to shape how readers see individuals in their historical context. In [Chapter 2](#), Galen Perras and Asa McKercher remind us, as English insists, that history is determined by the “intersection of people and policy.” Their investigation into American perceptions of Pearson throughout his diplomatic and political career reveals the way American policy makers saw Pearson as a function of their perceptions of Canadian foreign policy in the decades after the Second World War. American opinions of Pearson were linked to a growing suspicion of Canada's increasingly independent postwar foreign policy. Perras and McKercher argue that while many Washington insiders welcomed Pearson's steady rise, some were irritated and disappointed by his readiness to forge an independent course in international affairs. The authors identify the emergence of this trend long before Pearson's 1965 proposition to suspend US strategic bombing in Vietnam – an event that led to a falling out with US president Lyndon B. Johnson.

Political biography “personalizes” historical figures in time and space but risks overlooking the collective experiences of ordinary people. In [Chapter 3](#), Angie Sauer offers a “history from below” that decentres political biography by emphasizing the social, cultural, and transnational aspects of migration along the Canada-US border. Using the 1943–44 “lumberjack wars” as a case study, she explores how individual stakeholders – woodworkers, newspaper editors, and industry lobbyists – defied government expectations in search of economic advantage. While acknowledging that political decision makers are important, she reminds us that they work within and are constrained by a web of social and cultural connections. By collectivizing experience and prioritizing circumstance over character, she offers an interpretation of Canada-US relations that questions what political borders and boundaries meant for itinerant workers. The history of cross-border labourers in the forest, mining, and milling sectors reminds readers of the interdependence of traditional forms of agriculture and industrialization, as well as offers insight into the gendered, social, and cultural dynamics of the workers' family economies. Taken as a whole, such contexts are overlooked in broader historical accounts of high-level diplomacy

focused on national interests rather than the socioeconomic interests of citizens.

The dramatic resurgence of Indigenous Peoples as a political force in Canada since the Second World War also invites more biographical attention to Indigenous leaders who have reshaped Indigenous-Crown relations through interactions with and within Canadian institutions. In [Chapter 4](#), P. Whitney Lackenbauer investigates the selection of Canada's first Indigenous senator, James Gladstone, of the Blood Tribe, also known as the Kainai Nation. Situating the process that led to his appointment within shifting discursive and federal policy contexts on Indigenous Peoples after the Second World War, Lackenbauer parses how political and media commentators at the time framed biographies of the leading nominees for the Senate seat that Conservative prime minister John Diefenbaker designated for a First Nations man. Gladstone's appointment represented a much-celebrated step toward the formal recognition of Indigenous political rights, Lackenbauer observes. His chapter also reveals the ways that supporters and critics described the nominees – Gilbert Monture, Chief Andy Paull, and Gladstone – and testifies to the “constructed and contested nature of political appointments,” biography, and history more broadly.

In [Chapter 5](#), Stephen Azzi adopts a more traditional biographical frame to analyze Lester Pearson as political leader. Echoing Michael Holroyd, Azzi laments that political biography has been recast as the “shallow end of history” for the past half-century. This unfair characterization overlooks important contributions to our understanding of Canadian politics. English's work on Pearson, for example, outlines a uniquely Canadian style of leadership, one which “combines seemingly contradictory qualities – at once transformational and uninspiring.” Azzi argues that perhaps no other Canadian prime minister has captured this paradox more fully than Pearson, noting the tendency of his contemporaries and historians to dismiss him as an indecisive, uncourageous, and weak leader. Insisting that these critics have a limited grasp of the meaning of leadership, Azzi draws on a literature of leadership typically confined to business schools to demonstrate that Pearson's prescience and persistence in legislative and electoral affairs more than offset his cautious style. Furthermore, Pearson showed toughness and decisiveness as both party leader and prime minister, while cultivating future leaders and talent in caucus and cabinet. These qualities

enabled Pearson to revitalize the Liberal Party in the early 1960s and emerge as head of an exceptionally accomplished government that adopted transformative legislation and modernized the Canadian state.

Like Azzi, Penny Bryden credits English with rejuvenating Canadian political biography by broadening the scope beyond the life of the single subject and using his studies of Pearson and Trudeau to illuminate questions of identity and culture. In [Chapter 5](#), Bryden focuses on Gerda Munsinger, whose affairs with Progressive Conservative cabinet ministers erupted into a full-blown sex scandal in the mid-1960s. Bryden uses domestic and international media, as well as court documents, to show how Munsinger's story was presented to the public. Though it is usually treated by historians as simply a sorry episode in Prime Minister Pearson's political career, Bryden illustrates how Munsinger's life was shaped and reshaped to fit within the narrative of scandal. Her work invites us to shift our historical focus from the centre to the periphery, demonstrating how political biography can help to refine our understanding of the gendered social and political realities of 1960s Canada.

A close reading of a single policy maker's life can overturn long-established historical understandings. This is the case, for instance, with Jennifer Bonder's chapter on the politics of long-time Windsor member of Parliament and cabinet minister Herb Gray. Typically, Gray is portrayed as a staunch and unyielding Canadian nationalist in his approach to foreign investment and Canada-US relations. Biography, Bonder suggests, can be "the lens that adjusts the image from demagogue to pragmatist." Situating Gray in a specific place and time – Windsor during the heyday of the cross-border auto trade in the 1960s and 1970s – changes our understanding of Gray's brand of nationalism and the Trudeau government's policies. Using Gray's recently opened personal papers, Bonder argues that Gray was no firebrand economic nationalist but a careful and pragmatic compromiser. This judgment is borne out in Bonder's examination of the bureaucratic and political tensions surrounding Gray's efforts to shape industrial policy and control US investment. Through a close reading of his early political speeches and his important report promoting a foreign investment review agency, she demonstrates the way Gray balanced the need for American capital in specific sectors and regions with nationalist concerns about foreign direct investment. Dogmatic politicians seldom enjoy long political

careers like Gray's, and his flexible and measured approaches in the early 1970s help to explain why he held elected office for forty years.

In another biographical approach to understanding Canada's international policy, Greg Donaghy provides an in-depth look at the Middle East policy of Allan MacEachen, Trudeau's minister of external affairs from 1974 to 1976 and from 1982 to 1984. [Chapter 8](#) reveals the way the policy preferences of key individual decision makers, fixed in their personal belief systems and worldviews, were crucial determinants of Canadian diplomacy in the Middle East. The prime minister turned Canada's attention southward in 1974, challenging MacEachen to develop policies that reflected his progressive ideals. The result was a long *pas de deux* between MacEachen and Trudeau as they fenced with each other over Canada's Middle East policy against a backdrop of ceaseless Arab-Israeli conflict and bitter cabinet disension over the path ahead.

Recent calls to reorient the study of Canadian international history away from the North Atlantic Triangle to Asia and other parts of the world also invite detailed studies of diplomats who served in distant corners of the world.⁶⁶ "While the question of an individual's influence over government policy is central to political biography, the most effective biographies, political or otherwise, transcend their subjects to tell a larger story about the times in which their subjects lived," historian Brendan Kelly suggests. "This is especially true of the biographies of diplomats who, by the very nature of their work, straddle national and transnational environments and thus offer insights into both their country of origin and the wider world."⁶⁷

In [Chapter 9](#), Ryan Touhey tackles the diplomacy of John Hadwen, Canada's high commissioner to India from 1979 to 1983. Canadian hostility to India's nonaligned diplomacy and bilateral tensions over India's use of Canadian technology to detonate a nuclear explosion in 1974 had left bilateral relations in tatters by the mid-1970s.⁶⁸ Hadwen was sent to pick up the pieces. Touhey focuses on Hadwen's approach to his role, suggesting that he deployed a pragmatic diplomacy to convince senior officials in Ottawa of the value of forging positive relations with New Delhi in the aftermath of India's emergence as a regional nuclear power. Touhey uses a close look at Hadwen's personal papers and life story to demonstrate that Hadwen himself was vital in strengthening and redirecting Canada-India

relations, while he also explores the ways individual diplomats can influence national policy and shape bilateral relations.

Each of the essays contained in this collection attest to the importance of individuals in how we understand and make sense of history and in how we experience the present. John Milloy reaffirms this point in the concluding chapter of this book: a short reflection on English's own life story. Milloy draws on his experiences working with English, who acted as his informal academic advisor in graduate school and later as a political mentor on Parliament Hill and in the Liberal backrooms of Kitchener-Waterloo. Documenting English's political involvement at the local, regional, and national levels, Milloy argues that English embodies the four Rs of academic activism: he is relatable, respectful, realistic, and relevant. These traits allow English to transcend academia and contribute to Canadian public life as a consummate political activist.

The contributors to this volume, all of whom are close colleagues or former students of John English, would agree with Waite that biography is “not on the periphery of history; it is in the middle of it.”⁶⁹ They bring the historian's many tools to bear on past lives as they were lived and self-constructed, constructed by contemporaries, or reconstructed by historians. The authors show the ongoing relevance of discerning individual character traits, motivations, and justifications for action with careful respect for robust historical context. Rather than simply offering “minutiae without meaning” (as pundit and professor Stanley Fish provocatively characterized biography),⁷⁰ this collection not only provides rich detail – the *what* of biography – but also addresses the larger *so what* that drives history. The chapters stand as eloquent tributes to John English's transformative role in shaping contemporary political biography in Canada.

NOTES

- 1 John English, *Arthur Meighen* (Don Mills, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1977); *Robert Borden, His Life and World* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1977); *The Decline of Politics: The Conservatives and the Party System* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977).
- 2 Robert Bothwell, Ian Drummond, and John English, *Canada, 1900–1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990) and *Canada since 1945: Power, Politics, and Provincialism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981, 1989).

- 3 John English, "The Second Time Around: Political Scientists Writing History," *Canadian Historical Review* 67, 1 (1986): 1–16.
- 4 John English, *Shadow of Heaven: The Life of Lester Pearson*, vol. 1, 1897–1948 (Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1989).
- 5 John English, *The Worldly Years: The Life of Lester Pearson*, vol. 2, 1949–1972 (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1993).
- 6 Azzi, email to the editors.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 John English, *Citizen of the World: The Life of Pierre Elliott Trudeau*, vol. 1, 1919–1968 (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2006).
- 9 John English, *Just Watch Me: The Life of Pierre Elliott Trudeau*, vol. 2, 1968–2000 (Toronto: Knopf, 2009).
- 10 Citation inside of English, *Just Watch Me*.
- 11 W.J. Karr, *Explorers, Soldiers and Statesmen: A History of Canada through Biography* (Toronto: J.M. Dent, 1929), ix. He continued:

Not only do the stories of their careers give a picturesqueness and romance to our history, but they also set before us ideals of the highest type. Who can read the tales of their achievements for the good of Canada without being inspired with admiration, and who can admire without a desire to be worthy of the heritage which we owe to their labours.

Karr, *Explorers, Soldiers and Statesmen*, ix.

- 12 Robert Craig Brown, "Presidential Address: Biography in Canadian History," *Historical Papers/Communications historiques* 15, 1 (1980): 4.
- 13 Oscar D. Skelton, *The Life and Letters of Sir Wilfrid Laurier* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1921).
- 14 Thanks to Norman Hillmer for this idea. For more on Skelton, see Hillmer, *O.D. Skelton: A Portrait of Canadian Ambition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).
- 15 Brown, "Presidential Address: Biography in Canadian History," 4. See also Donald Creighton, "Sir John Macdonald and Canadian Historians," in *Approaches to Canadian History*, ed. Carl Berger (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 53.
- 16 Roderick Barman, "Biography as History," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 21, 2 (2010): 68.
- 17 See John S. Moir, ed., *Character and Circumstance: Essays in Honour of Donald Grant Creighton* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1970).
- 18 Donald Creighton, "Sir John Macdonald and Canadian Historians," *Canadian Historical Review* 29, 1 (1948): 3.
- 19 Donald Wright, "His Macdonald, My Creighton, Biography, and the Writing of History," *Canadian Historical Review* 98, 2 (2017): 342, 344. See also Wright, *Donald Creighton: A Life in History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).
- 20 Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing: 1900–1970* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 223.
- 21 J.M.S. Careless, *Brown of the Globe*, 2 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959 and 1963).
- 22 Penny Bryden, "Foxes, Hedgehogs, and the Changing Shape of English-Canadian Political History," *Canadian Historical Review* 100, 4 (2019): 589–90.

- 23 Adele Perry and Brian Lewis, “Introductory Remarks: Special Issue on “The Biographical (Re)Turn,”” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 21, 2 (2010): 3. See also Perry, “Beyond Biography, Beyond Canada,” *Canadian Historical Review* 98, 2 (2017): 321–37.
- 24 See, for example, Robert Rumilly, *Mercier* (Montreal: Édition du Zodiaque, 1936); *Henri Bourassa: la vie publique d'un grand Canadien* (Montreal: Éditions Chantecler, 1953); and *Maurice Duplessis et son temps*, 2 vols. (Montreal: Fides, 1973). For a list of other biographies, see Martin Pelletier, ed., *Portraits de L'Histoire: Les biographies politiques* (Quebec: Assemblée nationale du Québec, 2007), https://bibliotheque.assnat.qc.ca/DepotNumerique_v2/AffichageFichier.aspx?idf=75205.
- 25 See, for example, Serge Gagnon, *Quebec and Its Historians: The Twentieth Century*, trans. Jane Brierly (Montreal: Harvest House, 1985); Jean Lamarre, *Le devenir de la nation québécoise selon Maurice Séguin, Guy Frégault et Michel Brunet, 1944–1969* (Quebec: Septentrion, 1993); and Ronald Rudin, *Making History in Twentieth-Century Quebec* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).
- 26 See Clara Thomas, “Biography in Canada,” in *Literary History of Canada*, 2nd ed., ed. Carl Klinck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 3:180; Donald Swainson, “Trends in Canadian Biography: Recent Historical Writing,” *Queen's Quarterly* 87 (Autumn 1980): 432; and a survey of reviews in the *Canadian Historical Review* from 1965 to 1990.
- 27 See Philip Massolin, *Canadian Intellectuals, the Tory Tradition, and the Challenge of Modernity, 1939–1970* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).
- 28 Berger, *Writing of Canadian History*, 220–21.
- 29 For a useful sample, see J.L. Granatstein and Paul Stevens, eds., *A Reader's Guide to Canadian History*, vol. 2, *Confederation to Present* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982); and John English, “National Politics and Government,” in *Canadian History: A Reader's Guide*, ed. Doug Owram, vol. 2, *Confederation to the Present* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 3–50.
- 30 Entries in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, copublished by the University of Toronto Press and Laval University, are available online at <http://biographi.ca/>. See also Dictionary of Canadian Biography, “About Us,” http://biographi.ca/en/about_us.php.
- 31 Peter B. Waite, “Journeys through Thirteen Volumes: The Dictionary of Canadian Biography,” *Canadian Historical Review* 76, 3 (1995): 468.
- 32 On forms of biographical narration, see Ira B. Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984).
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- 36 Frances Halpenny, “Expectations of Biography,” in *Boswell’s Children: The Art of the Biographer*, ed. R.B. Fleming (Toronto: Dundurn, 1992), 23.
- 37 Goldwin French, Peter Oliver, and Jeanne Beck, “The Ontario Historical Studies Series,” in David Gagan, *Hopeful Travellers: Families, Land, and Social Change in Mid-Victorian Peel County, Canada West* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), xv.
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- 43 Peter B. Waite, “Invading Privacies: Biography as History,” *Dalhousie Review* 69, 4 (1990): 493.
- 44 Elsbeth Heaman, “Character versus Circumstance in Recent Canadian Historical Biography,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 43, 3 (2009): 234.
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- 57 English, *Citizen of the World*, 3.
- 58 See Kurt Heinrich, “Just Watch Me: Book Review,” Active [History.ca](http://activehistory.ca/book-reviews/review-5/), <http://activehistory.ca/book-reviews/review-5/>.
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- 60 William Johnson, “Review: Just Watch Me,” *Globe and Mail*, 30 October 2009.
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- 62 Berger, *Writing of Canadian History*, 222.
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- 65 John English and Robert Bothwell, foreword to *The Good Fight: Marcel Cadieux and Canadian Diplomacy*, by Brendan Kelly (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019), ix.
- 66 Recent calls on Canadian historians to more deliberately embrace global and transnational turns, critically examine race and gender in foreign affairs, and carefully parse the myriad domestic political, cultural, and socioeconomic drivers behind foreign policy also invite critical studies that engage with the views of Canadian decision makers and diplomats abroad. See, for example, Laura Madokoro, Francine McKenzie, and David Meren, eds., *Dominion of Race: Rethinking Canada’s International History* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017); and Asa McKercher and Philip Van Huizen, eds., *Undiplomatic History: The New Study of Canada and the World* (Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019). David Meren’s call for more complex narratives that expose Canada’s complicity in British and American imperialism, engage in critical revisionism, and move beyond “romanticized notions of Canada’s international action,” also encourages re-engagement, and potential reappraisal, of the diplomatic memoirs discussed by Bothwell and Hillmer in [Chapter 1](#). Meren, “The Tragedies of Canadian International History,” *Canadian Historical Review* 96, 4 (2015): 534–66. See also the responses in the same issue: John English, “The Tragedies of Canadian International History: A Comment,” *Canadian Historical Review* 96, 4 (2015): 567–75; Adam Chapnick, “Confessions of a Teacher, and Historian, of Canadian Diplomacy,”

Canadian Historical Review 96, 4 (2015): 576–82; and Dominique Marshall, “Réponse à ‘The Tragedies of Canadian International History’ : un autre survol historiographique,” *Canadian Historical Review* 96, 4 (2015): 583–89.

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- 69 Waite, “Invading Privacies,” 494.
- 70 Stanley Fish, “Just Published: Minutiae without Meaning,” *New York Times*, 7 September 1999, A23.

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