

Allan Levine. *King: William Lyon Mackenzie King, A Life Guided by the Hand of Destiny.* Vancouver: D&M Publishers Incorporated, 2011. 480 pp. \$36.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55365-560-2.



Paul Litt. *Elusive Destiny: The Political Vocation of John Napier Turner.* Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011. 448 pp. \$43.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7748-2264-0.



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For much of the past century, the Liberal Party dominated federal politics in Canada. Its relentless pursuit of power and smug claim to be the country's "natural governing party" infuriated its opponents. Socialists and Tories alike sneered at the party's shifting, restless search for middle ground and compromise, and the Faustian bargain that seemed to let it slip from office unscathed when the hard times came—in 1930, in 1957, and in 1979—always ready to roar back, stronger and more determined than ever.

That may no longer be true. The party's poor showing in recent elections suggests a new reality, one increasingly shaped by Canada's other major party. "My

long-term goal," Conservative Stephen Harper, the prime minister, declared in 2008, "is to make Conservatives the natural governing party of the country." [1] After heading the longest minority government in Canadian history, the prime minister took an important step in this direction with his majority victory in the May 2011 federal election. Making sense of this change will not be easy, but new biographies of two Liberal prime ministers, William Lyon Mackenzie King and John Napier Turner, who respectively managed the party's rise and fall, perhaps may help.

Winnipeg historian Allan Levine is an old hand at popular history, and it shows in his study of King, who

served as prime minister through most of the 1920s, and again from 1935 to 1948. Levine writes books that sell, always a tough business, and he has developed a sharp eye for the lively (and lurid) quote. *King* fairly trips along, serving up great dollops from King's legendary diary to explain the lonely Victorian romantic behind the politics. It follows its unlikely hero—clumsily diagnosed here as an insecure passive-aggressive male—with obsessive-compulsive tendencies (p. 10)—from childhood to University of Toronto and onto Harvard and Ottawa. There, as editor of the new *Labour Gazette*, King began his steady climb to power, winning a seat in the House of Commons in 1908 and appointment as the prime minister, Wilfrid Laurier, first minister of labor. Along the way, Levine charts the many ties King established and abandoned with a host of potential wives, apparent casualties of his excessive and downright creepy relationship with his mother, Isobel (p. 34).

Reciprocity swept Laurier and King from office in 1911. The defeated labor minister found refuge with American millionaire John D. Rockefeller Jr., on whose behalf he honed his skills as a labor mediator and buffed his credentials as a reformer. Safely, King waited out the Great War. When he returned to politics in 1919, Levine argues, King was rusty, an outsider with little standing in his party, who faced a country divided by linguistic, regional, and class divisions (p. 113). A poor speaker and cautious politician, he plucked the leadership of the Liberal Party from older, more experienced men. He did so, argues Levine, by embracing Laurier's legacy in postwar Quebec, championing labor and welfare reform, and offering unbending opposition to the Conservative enemy. This formula worked, and by 1921, King was prime minister.

Levine (and King) march through the 1920s, as the prime minister consolidated his power, outlasting the wily cabinet barons of Montreal and Toronto, beating down a governor general, and wooing dissident prairie progressives. King's national accomplishments at the time were few—an inadequate old age pension scheme and greater control over the country's foreign affairs—and voters sent him packing in 1930, just as the Great Depression was about to throttle the global economy.

Ignominy followed defeat. After the vote, R. B. Bennett's Conservative government pulled back the curtain on Liberal corruption at the Beauharnois hydroelectric project, one of the great Canadian scandals. King raged, he fumed, and he plotted, but as Levine reminds us, he never panicked. Opposition, the disgraced former

prime minister observed in 1932, breeds unrest & discontent, it was ever thus (p. 219). With help from Toronto industrialist Vincent Massey, King rebuilt the Liberal Party in the early 1930s, giving it form and financial substance, and keeping it focused on the Tory enemy. The result was victory in 1935.

For the next decade, King was at the height of his powers, a narrative climax that Levine sets up with a survey of King's staff, his strong cabinet ministers, and his machinery of government. Despite the prime minister's caution and calculation, the achievements that shaped modern Canada begin to mount: freer trade with the United States, a shift to Keynesian economics, the Rowell-Sirois report on renewed federal-provincial relations, and the declaration of war in September 1939 by a united Canada. And more was to come as war transformed Canada from a rural backwater into a modern industrial state on King's watch.

Levine is a careful historian, and his judgments usually reflect the detailed work of earlier, more expert scholars, whom he credits generously in his text. He is fair in condemning King's failure to welcome Jewish refugees to Canada in the 1930s, and in judging the Liberal government's shameful treatment of Japanese-Canadians during the war. Moreover, Levine's text is accessible and readable, built around King's personal relations with most of the key players in the lengthy narrative.

But the diary is a distorting lens, and Levine relies on it too much. King was undoubtedly an odd man, which must be acknowledged, but his professional and political success, and his capacity to maintain life-long friendships with dozens of correspondents suggest that his behavior was far from pathological. Surely, we would all seem pretty odd if we kept detailed diaries as meticulously as King? Seduced by the diary, Levine spends far too much time on ghosts and ghouls, on mommy dearest and King's dog, dear little Pat. Weird sells. It takes time and space too, and as a result, Levine often rushes and skimps on his history, leaving the uninitiated to wonder why Britain's abdication crisis was so important to Canada? Or how Social Credit's dividend worked? Or why Canada supported the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan? More important, Levine's preoccupation with *Weird Willy* obscures the largest single theme in King's career: the long, painfully cautious struggle to restore and enhance Canada's national unity. Unity was King's lens.

Division and discord was Turner's leitmotif. Car-

leton University historian Paul Litt never says so directly in his fine study, *Elusive Destiny*, but it is hard to hide his subject's baleful anger at life's defeats, great and small. It was not supposed to be like that. Litt's Turner was destined for success. Bright and accomplished, he shone at school and in sports, leaving University of British Columbia for Oxford on a Rhodes Scholarship in 1949. He kicked around Europe for a bit, picking up girls, a passable French, and a law degree, before settling down as a corporate lawyer in Montreal in 1954.

Postwar Canada, as one New York ad campaign put it, was *à*on the march, *à* modern, progressive, and booming, and Turner joined in the fun.^[2] He kibitzed with Maurice Duplessis and he danced with Princess Margaret. He and his friends about town, argues Litt, were typical of their age and class, *à*high modernists, *à* who combined their liberal nationalism with an enthusiasm for state intervention and better governance (p. 35). Turner himself dabbled with community service and legal aid, latching onto a reform wave that would crest in the turbulent 1960s. In 1962, the ambitious young lawyer was elected as a Liberal to the House of Commons for the historic Montreal riding of St. Lawrence-St. George.

Turner's progress in Mike Pearson's government was steady but unspectacular. *à*Had Pearson not known him as a child, *à* he complained (presumably to Litt), *à*he would have been taken more seriously *à* (p. 50). After a stint on the opposition backbenches, he was elevated to parliamentary secretary in 1963, and then made help-mate to Transport Minister J. W. Pickersgill, as minister without portfolio in 1965. Pearson promoted him again the following year to the registrar general's post, a fully fledged if junior minister. As he had in the 1950s, Litt argues, Turner *à*kept pace with the times *à* (p. 35). He backed popular policies that included more federal housing, free university tuition, capital gains and inheritance taxes, and a guaranteed annual income. But as Litt points out, on the decade's vital wedge issues—capital punishment and foreign (American) ownership—Turner voted with the country's establishment. Increasingly, these conservative instincts put Turner at odds with the party emerging under Pearson's successor, Pierre Trudeau.

Yet under Trudeau, Turner proved a good minister. He read his briefs and could handle complex files. He got along with his staff, and smoothly managed his political friends and rivals with a drink and a joke, confident, as Litt puts it, that *à*personal relationships and diplomacy were the duct tape and WD-40 of Canadian politics *à* (p. 148). These are among the best parts of the book, a clearly

and sharply written account of a new generation's efforts to shake up fusty Ottawa. Turner welcomed the era's ethos, boasting that *à*I run an open government ... and the senior members of my department have been told to answer all calls from the press *à* (p. 112). There was much to admire. As justice minister, Turner strengthened individual rights against the state, and improved the administration of justice, creating the Law Reform Commission, professionalizing the judiciary, and adding a policy research capacity to his department. He served as one of the government's leading spokesmen during the national debate over the Official Languages Act, and he steered it through the October Crisis in 1970.

But by 1971, Turner wanted out, vaguely unhappy with Trudeau's government. Duty and ambition kept him on, according to Litt, and as finance minister, he tackled the economic fallout that accompanied the collapse of the postwar multilateral trading system. Stagnant growth, soaring inflation, and surging deficits were the decade's tough challenges. They were hard to solve, and they sharpened the differences dividing Turner from Trudeau and his progressive, more interventionist colleagues. Turner did well with the Americans, but only fiddled with budgets (few did any better), before parting with Trudeau in late 1975. Economic policy differences were part of the problem, compounded by boredom, frustrated ambition, and growing familial responsibilities.

Turner prospered in Toronto as a Bay Street lawyer and fixer. The experience, Litt insists, left undiminished his essential reformism, which was rooted in Liberal tradition and Catholic teachings on social justice. For most of a decade, Turner held court at his favorite Toronto restaurant, and patiently waited his turn. When Trudeau finally retired in 1984, Turner, his instincts blunted and his organization sclerotic, tottered reluctantly into the race to succeed Trudeau with a platform borrowed from the opposition Tories: debt and deficit reduction, better relations with the United States, less bureaucracy, and more federal-provincial harmony.

Image is crucial to Litt's sympathetic view of Turner's later career. In exile, the author argues, the Canadian media created a mythical leader of improbable talents, whom it delighted in destroying when Turner returned to politics. He beat Jean Chr tien for the Liberal leadership in June 1984, but never had time to find his feet as prime minister. Taping briefing notes to lampshades, while visitors crowded his office, Turner struggled to set an election date; to justify an orgy of last-minute Liberal patronage appointments; and to contain

his defeated rival, Chr tien. As the campaign unfolded, the media magnified his every gaffe—his indecisive handling of the patronage scandal, his âbum patting,â and his wholly inadequate performance during the leadersâ debate—and Canadians abandoned him in droves. Littâs bottom line echoes a Toronto adman: âHeâs been done in by televisionâ (p. 286).

Turner soldiered on, with a plan to rebuild the party from the ground up, fixing its structure, rooting policy in its grassroots, and regaining Quebec. It was a credible plan, according to Litt, and well under way when *Fortuna* conspired against Turner. The Meech Lake Accord and free trade with the United States were gut-wrenching issues that exceeded Turnerâs fragile grip on party affairs and tore Liberals apart. Turner split the party over Meech Lake but rallied the faithful in opposition to the free trade deal. His last heroic campaign was too little, too late, and as Brian Mulroney, the prime minister, marched smiling back to office, Liberal knives were whipped out across the country and Turner was soon done.

Elusive Destiny is well written and engaging. But there are problems. Where there is too much King in Levine, there is not enough Turner in Litt. There are unfathomed hints of resentments and bitterness throughout the book (and Turnerâs life) that Litt might have tackled more openly and directly. He might also have been clearer in weighing the blame for Turnerâs ultimate

failure—King too had his challenges, but he succeeded. Were bad timing and circumstances truly at fault?

Elusive Destiny raises broader questions about the sources of contemporary history. Litt draws heavily on the vast trove of Canadian political reportage, in magazines and newspapers, and books published since the 1960s. Many of these accounts are both anonymous and compelling, and the temptation to use them understandably irresistible. They undoubtedly enrich his account. But reporters trade access for sympathy, and it is tough to know whose ox is being gored by oblique references to âcertain individualsâ and âsome appointeesâ (p. 309). No doubt, deep within one faction or another, some Liberal operative is smirking still with delight at having delivered another blow in the endless feuding that has come to define the Liberal Partyâs final innings. King, who made his political fortune with a bet on party loyalty above all, is surely spinning in his ghostly grave.

Notes

[1]. Michael D. Behiels, âStephen Harperâs Rise to Power: Will His New Conservative Party Become Canadaâs âNatural Governing Partyâ of the Twenty-First Century?â *American Review of Canadian Studies* 40, no. 1 (March 2010): 118.

[2]. Lester B. Pearson, *Canada: Nation on the March* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co, 1953).

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