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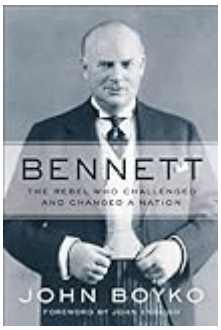

John Boyko. *Bennett: The Rebel Who Challenged and Changed a Nation.* Canada: Key Porter Books, 2010. 408 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55470-248-0.

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Published on H-Canada (August, 2012)

Commissioned by Jane Nicholas (University of Waterloo/St. Jerome's)

The Life and Times of R. B. Bennett

"There is more to Bennett than the Bennett buggy" (p. 25). In that simple sentence, John Boyko summarizes his purpose in writing this welcome single-volume biography of Canada's eleventh prime minister, R. B. Bennett. He is appalled that generations of Canadian students are taught to dismiss this remarkable Canadian as a kind of cartoon capitalist whose chief claim to fame is the association of his surname with a horse-drawn, engine-less automobile, disabled by the hard economic times of the 1930s. "The premise of this book," Boyko explains, "is that the consensus about Bennett is fundamentally flawed" (p. 23). With energy and conviction, he sets himself the task of righting a historic wrong.

The author is on solid ground when he notes that "most historians have dealt with Bennett only tangentially, and few have been kind" (p. 24). For instance, John Herd Thompson and Allen Seager, in their treatment of the interwar years for the Canadian Centenary Series, characterized his time in office with the revealing chapter title, "The Bennett Debacle."[1] Blair Neatby, in a book on Canadian politics in the 1930s, stated categorically that "as a politician he was a failure."[2] Robert Bothwell, Ian Drummond, and John English, in their widely used narrative of Canadian history from 1900 to 1945, commented that "most Canadians seemed to feel cheated by Bennett and his promises."[3] Boyko's own conclusion is diametrically opposed to this widespread consensus. "Despite the storm of criticism and a near absence of credit," he asserts, "Prime Minister Bennett did a great deal of good" (p. 17). Rather than cavalierly dismissed, Boyko contends, "he should be celebrated as an outstanding Canadian for his lifetime of daring and enduring accomplishments" (p. 23).

Biography, for several decades an undervalued and marginalized sub-genre within English-Canadian historiography, is enjoying something of a renaissance. Boyko's book joins a small but growing shelf of volumes about R. B. Bennett that mimics, to some extent, the evolution of historical biography itself. Three early entries were little more than fawning hagiographies: one, by Andrew MacLean, his one-time secretary, appeared while he was still in office; a second, by his long-time

friend, Lord Beaverbrook, presented a sketchy but affectionate portrait; while the third, by a sometime Conservative member of the Alberta legislature, Ernest Watkins, anointed Bennett a "great man," albeit a frustrated one, in a fairly shallow treatment of the Calgary-based lawyer, business tycoon, and politician.

In addition to the judgments of the more general histories, examples of which were cited earlier, the biographical debunkers of R. B. Bennett are mainly represented by the several authors of collective biographies of the Canadian prime ministers. For example, the popular journalist Bruce Hutchison, writing in the early 1960s, encapsulated Bennett's career in this phrase: "the ultimate drama of hubris and nemesis."[5] Bennett's own flaws, he contended, led directly to his downfall. Later in the decade another journalist, Gordon Donaldson, continued the negative image. "While Bennett stuffed down chocolates," he wrote, "flags of revolt appeared in the west."[6] Not a pretty sight. A generation later, the negative caricature continued in the scholar Michael Bliss's 1990s compilation. "Soon after becoming prime minister he reverted to his old form–erratic, emotional, insensitive, conceited, self-obsessed," Bliss stated. "He was a one-man band."[7] His judgment was echoed in a joint work by J. L. Granatstein and Norman Hillmer, which appeared soon after. "Bennett utterly failed as a leader," they concluded. "Everyone was alienated by the end–Cabinet, caucus, party, voter and foreigner."[8]

In the wake of the early hagiographic thesis, and this subsequent debunking antithesis, we also have a third approach, a revisionist attempt at critical synthesis that acknowledges the flaws in Bennett's character and record, but also seeks to be fair, and apportion credit where credit is due. James H. Gray, in *R. B. Bennett: The Calgary Years* (1991), dealt with the years leading up to his assumption of power as prime minister in 1930. His book chronicled the expatriate New Brunswicker's rise to prominence in law, business, and politics, noting both the strengths and the weaknesses.[9] At about the same time, a slim volume of three essays, *The Loner* (1992), by Peter Waite, appeared. As with Gray, Waite sought to portray the real R. B. Bennett, warts and all. Noting in his introduction that Bennett enjoyed "probably the worst reputation of any Canadian prime minister," Waite nonetheless set out to portray "the personal side of R. B.'s life, his character, his ideas."[10] His Bennett comes across as fully human, wearing neither horns nor wings. The third component of this revisionist triumvirate is my own examination of the Conservative Party during Bennett's years of leadership, *Reaction and Reform* (1992).[11] While the book was initially conceived as an institutional biography, Bennett featured prominently in it, just as he dominated the affairs of Canada's national Conservative Party during his time as its chieftain. Like Gray and Waite, I found much in Bennett's character and record to commend, and much to critique.

Where does Boyko's book fit? Clearly he aspires to the balanced critique school, but often in spite of himself he veers sharply into something approaching hagiography. Still, Boyko fairly presents the case put forth by those who disparage Bennett. This prime minister, he acknowledges, was frequently ill-tempered, often lacked patience, appeared overly sensitive to criticism, and on those rare occasions when he lost a battle, could be a very sore loser. He over-ate and under-exercised, dominated conversations with his thundering verbosity, and made little allowance for those around him who were less task-oriented than himself. All this Boyko concedes, but he also points to the other side of the ledger. Bennett was intelligent, hard-working, generous, and courageous. He possessed a prodigious memory for facts, so excelled at public oratory that he earned the nickname "Bonfire Bennett," and sought to live his life according to an admirable set of moral principles learned from home, school, and church. Throughout his life, he gave wholeheartedly to numerous charities, quietly subsidized the education of a number of promising students, and personally sent gifts of money to numerous needy individual Canadians. Not everything Bennett tried worked out, the author agrees, but he correctly emphasizes that Bennett served as prime minister during the five worst years of the Great Depression. He was unable to solve it, that is true, but then neither was any other world leader. What he did do was keep the good ship "Canada" afloat in stormy seas. Along the way, significant legislation was passed that permanently changed Canada for the better. Boyko mentions in particular the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the Bank of Canada, the St. Lawrence Seaway, and unemployment insurance. So passionately does this author argue the case for Bennett that we should perhaps classify his position as neo-laudatory. "All of this means that he was an effective leader," Boyko argues. "It does not mean that he was always a nice guy" (p. 22).

There is much to commend in this political biography. The author's prologue begins with a deft Creightonian passage in which Boyko imaginatively describes for the reader how Bennett might have appeared on the streets of London, England, during World War II. "The clothes told the tale of a still fiercely independent and well-to-do gentleman. The pinstriped suit with high-waisted pants,

swallowtail jacket falling to tails, stiff collar, and bold tie spoke of another era" (p. 15). Virtually anonymous in his adopted country, this solitary man had held the highest elective office in his native land of Canada, a short decade earlier. It is one of several narrative touches employed by the author to engage his reader in something more than an expository essay. John Boyko lets it be known that he has a story to tell, and for the most part, he tells it well.

Other passages told with a you-are-there flair include compelling descriptions of the cow town Calgary, at the time of Bennett's arrival from his native New Brunswick in 1897 (pp. 41-42), and the lumber town that was Ottawa in 1911, when Bennett stepped down from the train as a freshly elected member of Parliament from the West (p. 80). Similarly, the reader experiences the excitement and pandemonium of a crowded Winnipeg amphitheater as the convention chair announced to thousands of assembled delegates that R. B. Bennett had been elected their new leader. "Uproarious applause met each candidate who worked, one by one, to get to the microphone to withdraw in the old tradition of making the vote unanimous. Even greater applause washed over Bennett as he slowly weaved his way through the people and heavy tables and chairs to the front of the crowded platform to accept his prize. He shook every hand until he finally stood in the cramped space between the tables and the crowded floor. He beamed out at the cheering crowd from behind a large pie-plate-sized microphone that was hooked up to transmit his words to a national radio audience. There was no lectern" (p. 156).

At other times, Boyko plays the informed teacher (and quite honestly, since that is his vocation), patiently providing the needed context so that today's readers might understand how Canada was different seventy-five or a hundred years ago. For instance, English Canada was a much more "British" environment back then, as Boyko explains (p. 74). Moreover, when the economic crisis struck Canada in the 1930s, governments were hamstrung not just by ingrained laissez-faire economic ideas, but also by an acute absence of the kind of statistical data about the economy and business cycle which are taken for granted today (pp. 216-219). Bennett's Canada-First tariff increases, he shows, took place within an international world of protectionism and economic nationalism (pp. 222-225). Many of Boyko's imaginative comparisons both teach and entertain. "The St. Lawrence River was the first trans-Canada highway," he rightly notes, paying homage to Creighton's Laurentian theme. The lunacy of excessively tight money policy he sums up in this ironic yet apt way: "to get a loan you needed to prove you did not need one" (p. 296). Boyko deftly utilizes modern communication concepts to illuminate some of Bennett's public image difficulties. As problems with the relief camp strikers grew, the author accurately notes that "Bennett was losing control of the narrative" (p. 321). Furthermore, the prime minister's vividly candid pledge to apply the "iron heel of ruthlessness" to law-breaking demonstrators provided a "sound bite" that would come back to haunt him, ever after (p. 324).

Alas, the balance sheet on this biography is not uniformly positive. There are a troubling number of examples that speak to sloppy editing, and a rush to publish. Given that Peter Waite's long-awaited full-scale biography was expected to appear shortly, one can understand the drive to be out in print first. (As it turned out, Waite's new book *In Search of R. B. Bennett* did not appear for two more years.)[12] Some of the errors are minor. For example, the surnames of the four co-authors of a book cited in endnote 12 (p. 468) are inaccurately combined into two names. An abbreviated reference to a work by "Gordon," cited in endnote 21, is not preceded anywhere by the full reference (p. 469). The publication dates of books published by James Gray and myself are off by a year in the text (pp. 23-24), though they are accurately rendered in the bibliography. A sharp-eyed editor would have improved the following flawed phrases: "iron ore and other such products" and "grain, wheat, and corn" (p. 281) The relief camps were apparently set up to "provide work for the employed [*sic*] single men" (p. 313). There is an inconsistency four pages apart as to the dating of the five New Deal radio broadcasts (pp. 368, 371). Reference is made to "the Marketing Act and the Natural Products Marketing Act," though it was just one bill (p. 373). Finally, I cannot resist correcting Boyko as to the origins of my own book on Bennett. It was based on my doctoral dissertation, not my master's thesis (p. 24).

Many of the errors above, taken separately, are not outlandish. Some of these below are. Jimmy Gardiner is wrongly identified as the premier of Manitoba, not Saskatchewan (p. 323). John Brownlee is identified as Alberta's Conservative premier, when he led the United Farmers party (p. 191).The finance minister, Edgar Rhodes, is prematurely appointed to the Senate (p. 305) .The pro-Liberal *Globe* newspaper is identified as "staunchly Conservative" (p. 157). Arthur Meighen is identified as a sitting MP in the House of Commons in 1927, when in fact he had lost his seat in 1926 (p. 146). A party caucus at which interim leader Hugh Guthrie was chosen is misidentified as happening in October 1927, when in fact that was the date of the convention which

selected Bennett as permanent leader. The author has Mackenzie King resigning as PM in 1926, then requesting the dissolution of Parliament, when it was the governor-general's denial of the latter which precipitated the former (p. 140). The Beauharnois funding scandal is inaccurately identified as an issue in the 1930 election, when it did not surface for another year (p. 198). Ottawa native Charlotte Whitton is wrongly identified as an Alberta social worker (p. 316). The 1935 federal budget deficit is given as $17 million, which is represented as "the highest in the Bennett years" (p. 384). Sadly, this too is factually incorrect. The budget deficits for the previous three years were, respectively, $114 million, $221 million, and $134 million.[13] Publishing gremlins can sneak into any publication. However, the magnitude and frequency of the factual errors and editing slips in this book seriously detract from the author's avowed mission to straighten out the misinterpretation of Bennett's life and career.

There are some prominent topics about which Boyko might have had more to say. In the preface to his biography of Bennett's Calgary years, James Gray mentioned two legislative achievements by Bennett that caught his attention, and made the controversial Calgarian an attractive subject for a book. These key measures were: first, the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act, which involved the federal government in assisting western farmers to reclaim their wind-blown farms from dust bowl conditions; and second, the establishment of the Canadian Wheat Board to collectively market prairie grain. Boyko does not even mention the former, and deemphasizes the latter, which is generally grouped by other scholars with the CBC and Bank of Canada as lasting Bennett legacies, even by those who are among his harshest critics. On the debit side of the Bennett ledger, section 98 of the Criminal Code, which was controversially used by the Bennett government to prosecute vocal critics of the status quo, does not merit a listing in the index, although it is briefly mentioned in the text (pp. 324-325). Furthermore, Boyko wrongly attributes its legislative origins to the King government, when it was clearly the handiwork of Arthur Meighen. This confusion makes it easier for the author to describe Bennett as a politician of the left in 1935, an assertion that most historians, including this one, find dubious, the New Deal legislation notwithstanding (p. 411).

Boyko repeats the gossip that two of Montreal's, and Canada's, wealthiest plutocrats–Sir Edward Beatty and Sir Henry Holt–offered the former cabinet minister, Harry Stevens, who had publicly split with Bennett $3 million (a fabulous sum in 1935) to start a new party, but he does not cite his source (p. 358). This is unfortunate, because it was precisely wealthy industrialists like Beatty and Holt that Stevens had targeted in his pro-small-business crusade. Such an offer, if authentic, would cause a major reassessment of the motives of all three men. In another chapter, the author falls into sensationalist language, referring to a "sex scandal brewing" (p. 257). This certainly gets the reader's attention. In reality, all he is referring to is a brief Edwardian-style romance between the bachelor prime minister and a high-society widow from Montreal, Hazel Colville, whose family was well connected within the Conservative Party. Both Waite and Gray had mentioned this affectionate relationship in their own books, without hinting at anything like "scandal." Again, it is unfortunate that Boyko fails to justify the lurid language, and also regrettable that he does not refer in his endnotes to Waite, whose research unearthed the bulk of the correspondence between Bennett and Colville.[14]

Boyko makes frequent comparisons between events in Bennett's day and events from our own era. For example, he draws a parallel between Bennett's campaign in 1898 for election to the Northwest territorial assembly and Barack Obama's contest with John McCain for the U.S. presidency in 2008 (p. 46). Later, he compares the questionable use of prorogation by the Alberta provincial Liberals in 1909 to similar actions by the Harper Conservatives in 2008 and 2010 (p. 70). While writing about the rise of protectionism in the early 1920s, Boyko throws in a reference to a meeting of the World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland, in 2009 (p. 131). Bennett's successful 1930 campaign slogan, "Canada First," is paralleled to Obama's "Yes We Can" in 2008 (p. 199). Bennett's response to the economic crisis of the 1930s is compared to the reactions of Canadian and world leaders to the Great Recession of 2008 (p. 296). He notes similarities in the selfish business leaders that Bennett targeted in his New Deal radio broadcasts of 1935 and the Big Three auto executives of 2008 who rode in private jets to Washington to plead for a public bailout (p. 373). As a technique for connecting events of the past and present such comparisons may have some merit, but by the same token, as the events of 2008-10 recede into the past, these juxtapositions become less and less effective. The book's useful shelf life could well suffer as a result.

It is ironic that Boyko refers disparagingly at one point to the "clumsy metaphors" that frequently adorned the oral and written submissions to the Royal Commission on Banking and Currency (p. 301). In this book, he shows himself to be no slouch in the murky, even earthy, metaphor department. Political power, we are

informed, is "less a bookstore than a library" (p. 166). Every political party, we are told, "needs a good spanking from time to time" (p. 160). The Canadian economy of the 1930s was apparently in need of a "financial laxative" (p. 297). Mackenzie King's failure to create a central bank in 1923 is compared to a baseball player, perhaps the Mighty Casey, who "watched the fastball coming down the middle and let it sail by" (p. 295). A few pages later, he employs another sport analogy, referring to Bennett's "dream team of one-armed economists" who supported his banking ideas (p. 299). The meeting of R. B. Bennett and the leader of the relief-camp strikers, Slim Evans, is rendered as "high noon" (p. 397). Bennett's split with H. H. Stevens is described as "eyeball to eyeball" (p. 356). A few pages later they are "two bulls in the barnyard" (p. 360). Elsewhere, he cautions principled leaders to look away "even when the siren song of expediency offers the fleeting popularity of an easy battle easily won" (p. 313). And surely Bokyo is communicating tongue-in-cheek when he dismisses Franklin Roosevelt as "America's R. B. Bennett" (p. 260). Boyko's writing style is deliberately colorful, but there can be too much of a good thing. The point is this: a little too often the author's easy eloquence crosses the line into forced rhetoric, and it detracts from the underlying message.

Boyko's central theme remains clear, however. R. B. Bennett was a great prime minister–not a perfect human being, but a superbly capable political leader. Canada, in the author's view, was fortunate to have this man in power during the first and worst half of the 1930s. Not only did he steer the ship of state away from impending disaster, but he set a course for the future that led to growing economic prosperity and greater social justice. Ultimately, then, our judgment on the value of his biography will be determined by the skill with which he has made his case. Here Boyko is to be commended. The challenges facing Canadians during the Great Depression are clearly described. Bennett's undoubted accomplishments while in office are convincingly laid out, even as his personal foibles are acknowledged. Boyko is dead-on in his insistence that there was, and is, a lot more to R. B. Bennett than the Bennett buggy, Bennett blankets, and Bennett boroughs, even if he is not the finest prime minister in our history. The old stereotype of a do-nothing fuddy-duddy whose sole policy for national recovery was to jack up tariffs in a vain attempt to "blast a way" into world markets he lays to rest. Had he added just one qualifying word to the book's subtitle, the ironic nature of this millionaire politician's reforming zeal and lasting impact on Canada would have been crystal clear. The amended title would read "R. B. Bennett: The *Establishment* Rebel Who Challenged and Changed a Nation."

Notes

[1]. John Herd Thompson with Allen Seager, *Canada, 1922-1939: Decades of Discord* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1985), 253-276.

[2]. H. Blair Neatby, *The Politics of Chaos: Canada in the Thirties* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1972), 53.

[3]. Robert Bothwell, Ian Drummond, and John English, *Canada, 1900-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 266.

[4]. Andrew D. Maclean, *R. B. Bennett: Prime Minister of Canada* (Toronto: Excelsior Publishing, 1935); Lord Beaverbrook, *Friends: Sixty Years of Intimate Personal Relations with Richard Bedford Bennett* (London: Heinemann, 1959); and Ernest Watkins, *R. B. Bennett: A Biography* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1963), 252.

[5]. Bruce Hutchison, *Mr. Prime Minister, 1867-1964* (Toronto: Longmans, 1964), 237.

[6]. Gordon Donaldson, *Fifteen Men: Canada's Prime Ministers from Macdonald to Trudeau* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 1969), 141.

[7]. Michael Bliss, *Right Honourable Men: The Descent of Canadian Politics from Macdonald to Mulroney* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1994), 113.

[8]. J. L. Granatstein and Norman Hillmer, *Prime Ministers: Ranking Canada's Leaders* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1999), 113.

[9]. James H. Gray, *R. B. Bennett: The Calgary Years* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991).

[10]. P. B. Waite, *The Loner: Three Sketches of the Personal Life and Ideas of R. B. Bennett, 1870-1947* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), xiii-xiv.

[11]. Larry A. Glassford, *Reaction and Reform: The Politics of the Conservative Party under R. B. Bennett, 1927-1938* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

[12]. P. B. Waite, *In Search of R. B. Bennett* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012)

[13]. Glassford, *Reaction and Reform*, 127.

[14]. Gray, *R. B. Bennett*, ix; and Waite, *The Loner*, 73-81.

Citation: Larry Glassford. Review of Boyko, John, *Bennett: The Rebel Who Challenged and Changed a Nation.* H-Canada, H-Net Reviews. August, 2012.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36639