

Bulletin

Canadian Historical Association - Société historique du Canada

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Avis aux membres Notice to Members

Le rapport de la présidente de la S.H.C., tel que présenté par Margaret Conrad lors de l'assemblée annuelle à l'Université York, est disponible sur le site Web de la Société à l'adresse suivante : <http://www.cha-shc.ca/francais/>

The President's Report, as delivered by Margaret Conrad at the CHA Annual Meeting at York University is available on the Web site of the CHA : <http://www.cha-shc.ca/english/>

PRAIRIE GIANT

By David Smith, Professor Emeritus
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The CBC documentary 'Prairie Giant', depicting the life of T.C. Douglas, most particularly during the time he was premier of Saskatchewan, 1944-61, has generated turbulence in the normally still waters of Canadian biography. The source of the controversy is the film's depiction of J.G. Gardiner, another earlier premier of Saskatchewan, and for most of the life of the Douglas Government federal minister of agriculture under Mackenzie King and Louis St. Laurent. In the public mind T.C. Douglas personified the C.C.F.'s social-democratic ideology almost from the time he entered electoral politics, a reputation that kept on growing and has crossed party lines, as witnessed by his selection in 2004 as the greatest Canadian. Gardiner, a powerful political force for more than two generations (holding uninterrupted elected office from 1914 to 1958), has by contrast all but disappeared from public consciousness.

At least, until the producers of 'Prairie Giant' decided to portray him, not as the relentless champion of Liberalism that he was, but as a ruthless politician who dealt with opponents, partisan and otherwise, without scruple or feeling.

Such caricature does a disservice on several levels to both men and to Canadian history. First, it ignores what they, two dominant political figures of the last

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century in the relatively confined world of Canadian politics, had in common: physically small in stature, both were accomplished athletes in their youth; each was a devout Christian (and for all practical purposes, a teetotaler) — Douglas a Baptist, Gardiner a signatory to the terms of union of the United Church of Canada in 1926; but most relevant to this discussion, each in his own right was a formidable electoral campaigner. On the platform or in the hall, no one else existed when either of them spoke.

Second, and paradoxically, the melodramatic contest between virtue and its opposite, which the producers have chosen as the program's centrepiece, does no one justice. Douglas scarcely needs to stand on Gardiner to be recognized for his achievements, while the unredeemably flawed and personally repugnant character Gardiner is made out to be is so wide of the truth that Gardiner, who inspired strong feelings but never pity in his time, actually generates sympathy.

To cite an illustration: the Liberals governed Saskatchewan between 1905 and 1929, the last half of that period largely due to the organizing efforts of Gardiner. Under his leadership they went down to their first defeat when the Ku Klux Klan on an anti-foreign and anti-Catholic cry rallied opponents to what now might be called the Liberals' multicultural policies. Gardiner always said that 1929 was an honourable defeat. As it was, the Liberals won more seats and more votes than any other party; only a coalition of conservatives, Progressives and Independents unseated them. Yet 'Prairie Giant' has Gardiner in 1931 exiting the legislative assembly chamber and speaking to reporters, calling for 'a united legislature'. The issue he addressed was the use of the RCMP to suppress striking miners in the province's coal fields south of Regina.

That this episode is fictional there can be no doubt. Nowhere in a parliamentary system do leaders of the opposition, which Gardiner was at that time, speak for the legislature. More than that, in no legislature in which Gardiner sat would there have been unanimity. But it is less the factual misrepresentation of this incident than the conclusion to be drawn, supported by graphic images in the film, that require comment: Gardiner would never have counselled violence to disperse striking workers, some of

whom are depicted to be non-English. Even had he been premier, he would not have taken such action. Similarly, he criticized the unnecessary and extreme (in his mind) use of force by the federal government to break up the On-to-Ottawa trek of the unemployed when it reached Regina in 1935.

In all the thousands of pages of the Gardiner Papers in the Saskatchewan Archives, there is no evidence to support the suggestion, which 'Prairie Giant' offers, that Gardiner would sacrifice the interests of the province of Saskatchewan or its people to the cause of the Liberal Party. This is not to say that Gardiner was not a fierce partisan, or that he distrusted the C.C.F. and its programs, which often depended for their success upon an enlarged bureaucracy, one he thought threatened what he called 'responsible and representative government'. Defeating the C.C.F. was paramount in his mind, so much so that it led him into conflict with his Liberal prime ministers, who were far more sympathetic than he to the social policies the C.C.F. was promoting. But defeat did not justify deceit on the scale the C.B.C. program implies.

'Prairie Giant' disparages the work of a man who deserves to be commemorated, in the same spirit if not for the same reasons as Tommy Douglas.

For dramatic reasons and in the eyes of the producers, there may be a legitimate explanation for the interpretation 'Prairie Giant' advances of events in which Douglas and Gardiner played a role. For those concerned with historical accuracy as well as fairness, however, the tack taken is inexplicable.

The theatre-folk seem destined to accomplish what four decades of varied political opponents proved incapable of doing — consigning Jimmy Gardiner to the historical wilderness.

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