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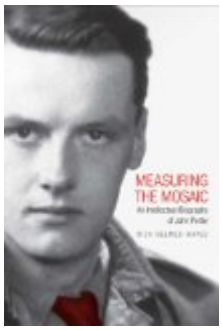
Rick Helmes-Hayes. *Measuring the Mosaic: An Intellectual Biography of John Porter.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010. Illustrations. xix + 588 pp. $37.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8020-9648-7.



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John Porter's *The Vertical Mosaic*, a stinging indictment of social inequality in Canada that used the newest quantitative social science methods to dispel the myth of the country being essentially a classless society, was published by University of Toronto Press in 1965. It was a bestseller and an almost instant classic, establishing sociology as a relevant and authoritative lens for viewing Canadian society, and propelling Porter to the top of the field. It was reviewed positively by a host of luminaries, including New Democratic Party leader Tommy Douglas in the *Globe and Mail* and T. H. Marshall, Porter's former London School of Economics (LSE) professor, in the *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*. The book's findings were profiled in *Maclean's*, the *Financial Post*, *Time*, and the *Toronto Star*, and served as the basis of a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation program, *Paths to Power*, before they were even published. None of this was too shabby for a man who had dropped out of high school to support his family during the Great Depression; who was able to attend LSE only because of his service in the Second World War; and who, despite a long career as an academic and administrator at Carleton University, only ever completed an undergraduate degree (although LSE granted Porter a doctorate in 1966 on the basis of *The Vertical Mosaic*). *The Vertical Mosaic* was at the core of Porter's ambitious struggle for power and prestige--a struggle that ended prematurely, not with the university presidency that he so coveted and indeed expected, but with death at fifty-seven, brought on by overwork and, some said, resentment at his final humiliation.

Even in capsule form, it is an astonishing Cinderella story of modern scholarship, with a touch of the Icarus myth thrown in at the end. This intellectual biography by Rick Helmes-Hayes, a labor of love that has been a quarter century in the making, does a very effective job of capturing the man behind the *Vertical Mosaic* phenomenon. The biography is comprehensive, providing the reader with everything they need to know about Porter's work, life, and times. Although the prose is uneven, some parts being weighed down with

theoretical, methodological, or historical parsing that is poorly integrated into the life story, overall *Measuring the Mosaic* is a very good book and a sympathetic and honest portrayal of the trials and triumphs of Porter the thinker.

Porter was born in Vancouver to British immigrant parents in 1921. His family was comfortable enough until his father's clerk job evaporated in the Great Depression and they ended up on relief. Shortly afterward, his parents' marriage began to fall apart. An intelligent student who was particularly gifted at creative writing, Porter had to drop out of school in 1937 when his mother took the family to England. After working odd jobs, he eventually landed a position at a newspaper in 1939, where his writing and sharp eye for social detail (and the enlistment of more senior staff) allowed him to become a good reporter. In 1941, he enlisted in the Canadian Army and served in Italy and the Netherlands. Bookish and brooding, Porter was an atypical enlisted man who wrote poetry and read political theory. He was made an officer in 1944, an exceptional accomplishment for someone who had not completed high school.

Throughout Helmes-Hayes's account in the first chapters of *Measuring the Mosaic* of Porter's coming of age, the young man is picked out of a crowd, his poverty and lack of formal qualifications are ignored, and some unexpected opportunity to excel is conferred upon him. Over and over, it is made clear that Porter was both an exceptionally intelligent and able person and lucky enough to be of a generation that, because of the unique circumstances of the war and its aftermath, was presented with opportunities for casual vertical mobility that would have been unimaginable in generations before or since. His war service landed him a job with the historical section of the Canadian Army, which allowed him to enroll in the London School of Economics and Political Science, despite his lack of formal education. At the end of his studies, with an undergraduate degree under his belt, he returned to Canada in the hopes of getting work as a journalist. Instead he was offered a job teaching at Carleton University, a job he held for the rest of his life.

Beyond its account of Porter's meteoric rise in fame and professional status following the publication of his masterpiece, *Measuring the Mosaic* devotes considerable space to Porter's later research innovations and eventual move into administration. Here the layers and hues of Porter's complex personality again come into view, as he struggled, in declining health and on a divided campus, to leverage his prominence into his ultimate job, the presidency of Carleton University. The failure of that ambition, and the toll it took on his outlook and health, are deftly captured by Helmes-Hayes. The struggles of late life, like those of childhood and adolescence, form a very powerful contrast to Porter's immense success.

Other aspects of the book are equally well executed. The profound transformation of sociology as a profession over the course of Porter's career is also very well observed and analyzed. In the 1940s, Porter was only slightly under-qualified to teach in a university program with an undergraduate degree in a related field. Within a decade, the culture had changed enough that he was more of an anomaly, and came under pressure to get a doctorate. However, he was able to get away with publishing research rather than earning more degrees. *The Vertical Mosaic*, published ten years after that pressure began, launched him to the top of his profession, and was methodologically and topically groundbreaking at the time of its publication. But within less than a decade again he was out of date, out of touch with new theories that were dominating the profession. The period of Porter's academic career was one of rapid professionalization and methodological and theoretical innovation and specialization, and Helmes-Hayes charts Porter's arc through this wave of change carefully and clearly.

Marion Porter's role in her husband's intellectual project and academic career is also deftly handled. She collaborated with him on social science research late in his life, and emerged from his shadow after his death, earning an MA in history and contributing to the development of women's history in Canada. But she was much more than simply a faculty wife before that, having actually written parts of *The Vertical Mosaic* without attribution when he was sick. Again, this personal story reflects profound changes in society, from a presumed assumption of faculty wife deference to a more independent career for middle-class women. Helmes-Hayes takes a risk in engaging in an awkward subject that has few models in academic biography, and the results are impressive.

There are a few things that do not work well, mostly the product of the best intentions. The key deficiency of the writing of the book is a disjointedness that is a result of too great a divergence in style, tone, and theme, from chapter to chapter. The strictly biographical chapters, especially early on, read entirely differently from the explanatory chapters on theory, methodology, disciplinary context, and political thought. It is difficult to imagine a reader who would find all the chapters equally meaningful (Bruce Curtis, maybe?). It is not a terrible sin to have a book noticeably shift gears between chapters, and Helmes-Hayes is dealing with a broad range of issues in the book; it would be a challenge for any author, no matter their intellectual background, to not only collect and absorb all this material, but also to present it coherently and with great finesse. Still, if you compare *Measuring the Mosaic* to Robert Skidelsky's *John Maynard Keyes, 1883-1946: Economist, Philosopher, Statesman* (2003) (another career-long labor of love), the difference is notable. Skidelsky weaves technical material and historical context into the life story, and never drops one mode of exposition for another when new ideas intrude on the action. Everything seems to be at stake in everything else, whereas the stylistic and thematic shifts between the chapters of *Measuring the Mosaic* invite the reader to see Porter's social context, work, and life as disconnected from one another.

The search for a political identity for Porter, which is touched upon throughout the book and then discussed in a lengthy afterword, is a central cause of the overall unevenness of prose. Helmes-Hayes is keen to claim a single political-intellectual identity for Porter, which inspires a long discussion of New Liberalism, which is of questionable relevance to the rest of the book. Early on, the reader is informed that "the boundaries between left liberalism and social democracy are blurred and permeable" (p. 65); Helmes-Hayes believes that Porter belongs on the liberalism side rather than the social side of that blurred and permeable boundary, and devotes considerable expository effort to make the case. He cites Porter saying that noted liberal L. T. Hobhouse was a key influence, so the issue could be left there. Instead the final fifty pages of the book are devoted to a long list of New Liberal thinkers, in an effort to further make his case. This focus on positioning Porter politically, on differentiating his position from social democracy, feels increasingly out of place and distracting the longer it goes on, and the further it takes us from the fascinating case of Porter.

A biography is statistical sample of one: it cannot tell you much about everyone, but it can tell you an awful lot about one person. Helmes-Hayes seems to forget (or perhaps resent) this at times, and wants to draw on evidence besides that which he has already presented to explain Porter's idiosyncrasies. Combing through Porter's lecture notes and cross-referencing them with the beliefs of other New Liberals does not tell us nearly as much about why Porter believed in a meritocratic quasi-socialism as the first few chapters of the biography do. Put simply, he was a disadvantaged kid who made it. His life arc should leave us in no doubt as to why he would oppose inequality

of opportunity and champion inequality of condition with equal conviction. Helmes-Hayes ultimately seems to distrust biography as an intellectual exercise, and wants to be more of a sociologist when he should trust the story.

When it comes to the question of why ***The Vertical Mosaic*** was such a sensation, however, Helmes-Hayes seems to forget that he is a sociologist. He cites without comment Porter's claim that he was baffled by the book's popularity, but also offers ample evidence that it was Porter's intention to write a popular book, or at least that he was expecting to. ***The Vertical Mosaic*** eschewed theoretical exposition, and it did not cite existing studies in the field--a clear giveaway that Porter was not (entirely) writing for the approval of his fellow scholars. At one point he considered publishing with a commercial press, which was not an option open to many scholars preparing their first monograph then or now. Helmes-Hayes notes that Porter knew of other books on similar questions that were popular and fielded questions from journalists interested in his findings before the book was published, all of which pointed to a considerable public appetite.

Porter's career, in which a bestseller was the basis of an academic career, is an excellent illustration of the phenomenon described in Russell Jacoby's ***The Last Intellectuals***: ***American Culture in the Age of Academe*** (1987): the eclipse of the scholarly books aimed at general reading public after the 1960s. Helmes-Hayes notes that sociology changed quickly over Porter's short career as an academic star. No one wrote another ***Vertical Mosaic***, but partly that is because a ***Vertical Mosaic***-type book would not have been recognized as real sociology and would not get the author a sociology job after 1970. In the end, the book seems to have been best described by S. D. Clark, Porter's sometime ally and sometime nemesis, who said of the draft manuscript that it "must not be judged as a work of scientific sociology.... It is a brave piece and one which is certainly not going to go unnoticed" (p. 123).

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