

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Denis Smith. *Rogue Tory: Life and Legend of John G. Diefenbaker*. Toronto: Macfarlane Walter and Ross, 1995. xiii + 702 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-921912-92-7.

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John George Diefenbaker, Canada's thirteenth Prime Minister, has been called a "rogue," a "renegade," a western hero, and the defender of the "underdog." Throughout Diefenbaker's life, he was either loved or hated; there was little ground for neutrality. Denis Smith's biography of Diefenbaker, Dief the Chief as he was often called by his friends, is a balanced picture of this embattled Prime Minister. At first glance, the biography seems to be a daunting task to read with nearly 600 pages of text and a further approximately 100 pages of notes and bibliography. Yet, Smith tells a compelling story with the transitions from chapter to chapter pulling the reader along through Diefenbaker's life that was both heroic and tragic.

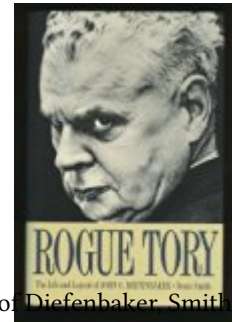
A professor of Political Science at the University of Western Ontario whose previous publications include a biography of Walter Gordon, Denis Smith was born and raised on the prairies and, as a young person, was introduced to Diefenbaker. Smith watched Diefenbaker's political career with keen interest. This personal knowledge of the man and his environment is reflected in the biography. Smith credits Donald G. Creighton, a well-known historian and widely acclaimed founder of the modern school of Canadian biography, as his model biographer. Creighton won respect and praise for his two volume biography of John A. Macdonald, Canada's first Prime Minister. He was able to present a clear picture of the subject of the biography with a balance of "character and circumstance." With the rise of social history, Creighton's biographical approach, viewed as elitist, went out of vogue in historical circles during the 1970s and 1980s. In the current decade, the pendulum has begun to swing back to biographies of women and men, including political leaders. The better biographies go beyond celebrating their subjects, but place them within the context of the times in

which they lived. In his biography of Diefenbaker, Smith tries to achieve a balance of character and circumstance. For the most part, this goal was achieved.

This biography of Diefenbaker shows him as a man, a defence lawyer, and a politician. These three aspects are carefully woven together throughout the book. When portrayed as the man, John Diefenbaker's personal side is shown as he relates to the three women in his life: his mother Mary; his first wife Edna; and his second wife Olive. Mary Diefenbaker was a domineering woman who exerted influence over his son throughout his marriages and his political career. Diefenbaker, from an early age, showed signs of indecision, and a lack of trust in his friends and supporters to the point of paranoia. Smith demonstrates how these personality weaknesses came back to haunt Diefenbaker when he was leader of the Progressive Conservative Party and ultimately Prime Minister. These character flaws led to his downfall.

As a defence lawyer, first in Wakaw and later in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, Diefenbaker honed his skills as an orator and actor. He drew attention to himself and built a high profile by successfully defending the downtrodden and the underdog. This public stage became the training ground for his political career and built for him a constituency of supporters who followed him to his grave.

Political victory did not come easily to Diefenbaker. He ran for office, provincially and federally, five times before winning an election. Yet each defeat and humiliation made Diefenbaker all the more attractive to the common person, particularly in Western Canada. These common people had suffered similar trials and tribulations in life and knew that only through perseverance and hard work could victory be attained. It was on his third attempt to



gain the leadership of the federal Progressive Conservative Party that he finally achieved his goal. Diefenbaker showed Canadians that a prairie boy from humble roots could become Prime Minister.

From his early days in the House of Commons, it became apparent that Diefenbaker was not a team player. He often shirked his duties in the committee meetings by failing to appear but was quick to rise in the House during Oral Question Period to grill the government. Diefenbaker preferred to shine on the broader stage. It was finally at the age of 61 that John George Diefenbaker achieved his life-time goal of becoming Canadian Prime Minister. Denis Smith notes that this achievement was too late in coming. Diefenbaker was too set in his ways to change and to keep pace with a changing country. The seeds of defeat became apparent in the early days of the Diefenbaker government.

Smith provides the reader much of the detail of the Avro Arrow debacle and the internal struggles and scandals in cabinet, yet does not lose sight of the subject of the biography. The book is a balance of character and circumstance. The biography ends with a sympathetic and understanding description of the death of Diefenbaker and his final journey by train back to his home province of Saskatchewan.

*Rogue Tory* contains 90 pages of end notes which do not interfere with the flow of the story. A comprehensive bibliography also offers the reader a list of further reading on the topics of Canadian politics in the

1950s and 1960s. It is an academic work, sound in references and well written. The author's prairie roots and his early meeting with John Diefenbaker are reflected in this book. Smith shows an understanding of a stubborn, popular, yet sometimes petty leader, who ultimately led his party to the largest election majority in Canadian history only to let it fade into minority government and political chaos.

In his biography, Smith is able to show both the legend and the myth of this prairie leader and carefully traces the weakness in Dief's character that ultimately led to his downfall. Yet on his death, Dief was mourned by political friend and foe alike. People were prepared to overlook the frailties of the man and to remember the legend, the defender of the common person and the champion of human rights.

*Rogue Tory* offers a comprehensive analysis of Canadian politics during Diefenbaker's time, yet it also offers a personal glimpse of the man from the West who wanted to lead his country to glory. The tragic irony of the story was that the country was changing faster than its leader. Smith's biography is a balanced picture of a complex political leader. This biography is a cornerstone of worth and value for Canadian bibliographic history. It is well worth reading.

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