

H-Diplo

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H-Diplo has commissioned reviews of the Makers of the Modern World Series (Haus Publishing), which concerns the Peace Conferences of 1919-23 and their aftermath. The 32 volumes are structured as biographies in standard format or as specific national/organizational histories.
<http://www.hauspublishing.com/product/229>

H-Diplo Review Essay of:

Martin Thornton, *Sir Robert Borden: Canada. (Makers of the Modern World Series)* Haus Publishing, 2010. Pp. xvi + 224pp. Notes, chronology and further reading, ISBN 978-1905791842.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/PDF/Haus-Canada.pdf>

Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Robert Bothwell, University of Toronto**

Sir Robert Borden was fond of saying, “Politics is just one damned thing after another.” It’s a phrase that kept recurring in my mind as I slogged through Martin Thornton’s *Sir Robert Borden*, the first book on the subject in thirty years. Thornton’s *Borden* is part of a handsomely designed British collection, *Makers of the Modern World*, devoted to the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, which comprises no fewer than 32 biographical titles.

Thornton has an ambitious task, to convey Sir Robert Borden to a (mainly) international audience, explaining Borden’s origins, attitudes and character, while doing justice to his role in Paris in 1919. For those Canadians already familiar with Borden, there is little new here, not surprisingly, for despite some research in the Borden and Lloyd George papers, this is a work of synthesis.

To do it, Thornton has to delve into the lost world of “dominion status,” the term that defined Canada’s international standing between the First and Second World Wars. He is not helped by the fact that Borden himself several times changed his mind on the significance of his political and constitutional work – not surprising, given that Borden lived a long time and had time to recalibrate his career to fit the perceptions of posterity.

(This is a common trait among memoirists, and can be found, for example, in the memoirs of Paul Martin Sr.)

A progressive by osmosis (progressivism was the political ocean Borden swam in), Borden certainly expected the British Empire to evolve during and after his lifetime. But he expected it to endure more or less as it had been – large and powerful, if subject to the same opportunistic vagaries that defined politics as he lived and experienced it. Politics, after all, was the art that made it possible to put ideals into practice. Politics was practical, a term that Borden used to distinguish himself from the imperial theories of the Round Table movement in Great Britain and Canada. In 1919, he used it to distinguish his own role and perspective from that of the “experts” that Woodrow Wilson brought from American universities to Paris, to advise him on the One Just Way to peace. (Borden had little time for Canadian “experts” in 1919, and, contrary to Thornton, excluded them from the small Canadian delegation he brought to Paris.)

What Borden sought in Paris was above all recognition from the Powers of the Earth – recognition that Canada’s voice deserved to be heard in international affairs, recognition of the sacrifices Canada had made in the cause of the British Empire and civilization in the Great War of 1914-18. He was not seeking independence. Canada already had autonomy in the British Empire, and had had since the 1840s, but it was obvious that modern conditions, as the war had just shown, required Canada to take an interest in international affairs. Borden hoped that interest would be manifested through the British Empire and that contributions to the Empire by Canada and the other dominions would be repaid through influence over the Empire’s foreign policy, as directed through London.

It did not happen. In 1919, Borden got his principal demand, recognition and approbation, baubles tossed away by an opportunistic Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister. Lloyd George had his goals, and Borden had his. As one politician to another, they fitted together their respective needs in Paris. But only two years later, Lloyd George stiffed Borden’s successor, Arthur Meighen, at the Imperial Conference of 1921, riding roughshod over Canadian interest in the abrogation of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. The circumstances of the moment dictated Lloyd George’s position in 1921, as they had in 1919. The next year, 1922, Lloyd George did it again, over a potential war with Turkey, with the assistance of his ministerial imp, Winston Churchill. These later events counted heavily in the devolution of the British Empire in the 1920s and 1930s.

If Thornton’s book contains little that is not already known to the small band of specialists who know something about Borden, will it be much use to those who do not already know him? It depends, of course, on what you want them to know. Thornton gives more coherence to Borden’s career than it really had, but it must be said that the book, with its many asides and digressions, some important, some not, does replicate the incoherence of life – including Borden’s life. Borden was not averse to being admired and petted, and on the whole that is what Thornton does. In sum, this book is a handsome package, but with stale contents.

Robert Bothwell is the Gluskin professor of Canadian history at the University of Toronto, director of the International Relations Program at that university, and a senior fellow of Trinity College. Educated in or at Ottawa public schools, the University of Toronto, and Harvard University, he has worked at the University of Toronto since 1970. He is the author, co-author, and editor of some twenty-odd books, including, most recently, *The Penguin History of Canada* (2006), *Alliance and Illusion* (2007), and *Canada among Nations*, (2008).

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