

J. E. HODGETTS, WILLIAM McCLOSKEY, REGINALD WHITAKER, V. SEYMOUR WILSON. — *The Biography of an Institution: The Civil Service Commission of Canada, 1908-1967*, Montreal and London, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1972.

There was a time when commissioned institutional histories were written eulogistically and read sceptically. Readers can be less certain about the aims of more recent studies. Corporations and institutions have changed. Modern executives believe that adaptation and change are prescriptions for progress and are less perturbed by descriptions of the warts and blemishes of their predecessors. They are also impressed with the academic prestige which is now associated with scholarly studies. Commissioning a history of an institution may still be legitimately classified as an advertising expense, but the executive of today knows that the best image is achieved by hiring an academic and giving him a free hand. Scholars have welcomed the new climate. They can now be paid without being accused of having become hired publicists. They may still be reluctant to bite the hand that feeds them but an ambitious author may be more concerned with his academic reputation than with the reputation of his subject. The reader will get more footnotes and more academic jargon but he may also get more analysis and less whitewash.

In this study of the Civil Service Commission, the four authors probably had even fewer restraints than the historians of private institutions. Their project was sponsored by the Public Service Commission. The Commissioners, like most senior public servants, have great respect for academics and for scholarly research. They may also have found it easier to justify the costs involved. At any rate, in this case, detachment came more easily because the Civil Service Commission no longer exists. The Public Service Commission can thus have it both ways. It can argue that a critical assessment of its predecessor is an exercise in commendable self-scrutiny while claiming, if necessary, that new legislation and new management have made any serious criticisms irrelevant.

The authors have made excellent use of their sources and resources. Their book is a fascinating and enlightening analysis of personnel policy in the federal service over a period of sixty years. The Civil Service Commission emerges as an institution so essential that it had to be created, but with objectives so confused and contradictory that it never made sense. As befits a work of scholarship which must appear scholarly, there are no denunciations and there is no sense of outrage, but there is no wincing over the partisanship, the incompetence and the confusion. It is a history of false starts and painful reappraisals. The authors do suggest that the constant reassessments and the efforts to find new goals is a credit to the institution; it is harder to argue that these efforts were constructive.

The book is an impressive study of the divergence between theories and practice, between rhetoric and reality. It is less successful as a study

of the external pressures which shaped the institution. The authors do not ignore the external environment but the complexity of identifying, to say nothing of weighing, political pressures, bureaucratic pressures, regional and cultural pressures and the changing intellectual and social milieu, often has forced them to ignore the problem or to rely on over-simple generalisations. It is not a serious fault, however. Few biographies of individuals have a satisfactory balance between character and circumstance, and it is surely more difficult to write the biography of an institution.

Occasionally, however, the reader is sorry that the authors take themselves so seriously. Here was a magnificent opportunity for satire. They are describing a Commission whose independence is carefully safeguarded so that it can protect the government against the temptations of patronage, only to find that the major concern of many of the Commissioners was to divine and then to recommend what the politicians wanted. It was an institution to which civil servants looked for support in their struggle against Treasury Board at a time when the Commission was little more than an agency of the Treasury Board. The Commissioners always appealed to some high principle, whether it was the undefinable but virtuous principle of merit or the latest fad in management relations, but the Commission itself stayed safely mired in the quicksand of deadening routine. The Commission was a fraud for the very good reason that the government was the employer and could not be expected to allow an independent Commission to define merit or efficiency or to act as an arbiter in disputes with government employees. And so the charade continued until the Civil Service Commission gave way to the Public Service Commission in 1968. There are lessons to be learned from this study but satire might have highlighted these lessons more effectively.

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HOWARD PALMER. — *Land of the Second Chance. A History of Ethnic Groups in Southern Alberta*, Lethbridge, The Lethbridge Herald, 1972.

Mr. Palmer has given us a very useful and timely history of ethnic groups in Southern Alberta: useful because it is a sensitive as well as informative study, and timely because it sheds light on the nature of the presently much-discussed multiculturalism or cultural pluralism of a region of Western Canada which has been characterized by a large influx of Americanized minorities as well as of European and Asiatic groups. The book is rather uneven because, as the author admits, it is an amalgam of journalistic pieces about distinctive communities, research papers, and the author's theses on nativism and ethnic tolerance in Alberta. Nevertheless, it has the singular distinction of employing what is relevant and meaningful from sociological conceptualization without capitulating on its jargon or sterile rigidity. Much of the work is compilation, to be sure, but this too