

**The Man from Halifax: Sir John Thompson, Prime Minister.** P.B. WAITE. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985. ix, 523 p. ISBN 0-8020-5659-8 \$37.50.

Hitherto, Sir John Thompson has been recognized by most Canadians, if at all, as one of the four Conservative prime ministers who held office between the death of Macdonald and the accession to power of Laurier, and about whom the most pressing question seemed to be “who succeeded whom?” Professor Waite’s study is therefore, in a sense, a work of historical rehabilitation, as well as a most worthy addition to the literature of political biography which has formed so prominent a part of Canadian historiography.

It is hard to dispute the propriety of that rehabilitation after reading the book. Whether measured by the substantive achievements of his career or the personal style which characterized his political behaviour, Thompson was one of the most impressive of our late nineteenth-century politicians; his death in 1894 at the age of forty-nine (while at lunch at Windsor Castle after being made a member of the Queen’s Privy Council) robbed the Conservative Party of Macdonald’s only true successor, and the country as a whole of one of its most capable and principled public figures. His noteworthy career deserves the attention of a skilled historian, and this it has found in the treatment provided by the author. Professor Waite writes with the authority that comes from solid research, a finely tuned feel for the late nineteenth-century context, and an eye for personal and social detail that makes him one of our most readable historians.

Thompson’s political career spanned all three levels of jurisdiction beginning with Halifax alderman and ending as prime minister; in between he was a Nova Scotia cabinet minister and, briefly, premier. As Waite makes clear, what stood behind that career was not driving personal ambition but a sense of duty and a wife determined that her husband’s considerable talents would not go unmeasured. As Annie Thompson told him, “In Ottawa you will know for the first time what you are capable of.” Once in Ottawa, late in 1885, Thompson fairly threw himself into his work as Minister of Justice, pining all the while for wife and family in far-off Halifax, and confiding to Annie that he could not have borne “the depression ... but for the feeling ... that you wished me to do what I have done.” When he expressed his desire to get out of federal politics, her stern reply was “No, you shall not [give Ottawa up], you are there and the world must see what you are made of — so now no more coaxing.”

Thompson brought to Ottawa a powerful mind and a great capacity for work. He was characterized as well by a strong disinclination to support Macdonald’s centralist view of the federation, and a tolerant breadth of view on religious and cultural matters (partially the result of his being a convert to Roman Catholicism) that distinguished him from Conservatives like D’Alton McCarthy. His first major speech in the House of Commons was a defence of the government’s decision to proceed with the execution of Louis Riel. This contentious issue, and other similar ones which were to follow, such as the Jesuits’ Estates question, were well-suited to Thompson’s dispassionate and fair-minded approach to public life. He was able to establish himself as one of the strongest figures in the government while avoiding what Waite calls “the realm of rhetoric, propaganda and partisan utterance.”

Thompson’s place in federal politics would have been significant if only for these contributions. His role, however, as Waite’s thorough discussion makes clear, extended to virtually every major issue facing the government. The fisheries negotiations with the United States in 1888, the protracted struggle with Imperial authorities over the question

of copyright, the major revision of the Criminal Code in 1891-92, the Paris negotiations in 1893 over the Behring Sea seal fishery, and the Manitoba and North West schools questions all fell to Thompson. Waite's analysis of these events is well done, but the book's ultimate strength lies elsewhere. In his review of Sandra Gwyn's *The Private Capital*, Waite remarked that our historians' preoccupation with "the political, economic and constitutional" has sometimes "emptied our academic history of its life." This fault cannot be laid at his door. *The Man from Halifax* is alive with real people, not only because of the author's mining of the rich personal correspondence in the Thompson Papers, but equally because of his perceptive eye and, quite simply, evident conviction that the deftly crafted descriptive portrait of events and personalities is an integral part of the historian's craft.

If there is need for a caveat it is this — Waite's study clearly demonstrates that Sir John Thompson ought properly to be considered one of the major figures in late nineteenth-century Canadian history (Macdonald called him "the best thing I ever invented"), yet concludes with the statement that Thompson's legacy, in the end, was "integrity and ... hard work." Perhaps this is so, given that his career was cut short before he had time to leave his mark on the prime ministership, but surely his achievements warrant a somewhat bolder conclusion. This criticism notwithstanding, *The Man from Halifax* ranks with the best historical writing produced in this country.

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**The Supreme Court of Canada: History of the Institution.** JAMES G. SNELL and FREDERICK VAUGHAN. Toronto: The Osgoode Society with the University of Toronto Press, 1985. xv, 319 p. ISBN 0-8020-3417-9 \$40.00 cl., \$17.50 pa.

When I was an undergraduate, my introduction to the Supreme Court of Canada was Peter Russell's *Leading Constitutional Decisions*. What a changed picture of the Supreme Court emerges from Snell and Vaughan's history of the court. Russell's description of a "captive" court unwilling to strike out on independent paths is enhanced by Snell and Vaughan's full account of the Supreme Court's beleaguered life. Underlying their study is a comparison of the Canadian court with its counterpart in the United States. The judicial activism of the American Supreme Court appears to be the standard against which the Canadian court is measured. And in comparison with the American court, the Supreme Court of Canada has been both cautious and conservative in its judgements, preferring to apply existing laws rather than interpreting the law under changed social conditions.

This history is familiarly Canadian. The court's early years after Confederation are not the stuff from which legends are made: judicial appointments refused, merit taking second place to regional representation, haggling over salaries and pensions, reluctance to live in the capital, and dismal court facilities on Parliament Hill. Even as the court survived its first decades and passed into the twentieth century, its stature and reputation suffered from overt political appointments — flagrant in the case of David Mills — and from some spectacularly bad judgements — as in the "persons case" when the court declared that women had not been "persons" in 1867 and therefore were not persons in 1928. The greatest effect on the court's judicial behaviour up to its independence in 1949 was the