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"Canada and the End of the Imperial Dream: Beverley Baxter's Reports from London through War and Peace, 1936-1960 (Book Review)" by Neville Thompson

Brian Tennyson

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Stewart alludes to the possibility of subterfuge surrounding the way orders were constructed to secure the cooperation of the air and naval forces (p. x) by citing the work of one of his staff college students, who claimed that Montgomery and his subordinates always thought Caen an entirely unrealistic objective.⁴ If true and taking Caen on D-Day was always 'over ambitious', 'unachievable' and 'too optimistic' (pp. 146-151) and the bridgehead secured on D-Day 'a notable feat of arms' another question arises: was why was Smith's aversion to risk punished by relieving him of his command a few days later?

Ultimately, the details provided in the book give the reader sufficient evidence to delve deeper into these issues. The book provides an extremely enjoyable and illuminating description of the events and activities of the 3 Br Inf Div which adds a significant degree of granularity to the events that occurred on Sword Beach and further inland on D-Day. By giving the reader insight into the various factors that influenced Brigadier Smith's thinking, *Caen Controversy* has opened up areas for further study and discussion. The overall message conveyed tallies neatly with other recent work by David French and John Buckley,⁵ and would be particularly relevant and useful for academics and graduates studying the invasion of Normandy, beach assaults and littoral operations as well as those enthused by the D-Day anniversaries to find out more about what really happened on that fateful day.

DAVID STUBBS, *INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER*

Canada and the End of the Imperial Dream: Beverley Baxter's Reports from London through War and Peace, 1936-1960. Neville Thompson. Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. 393.

Canadians of a certain age will remember Beverley Baxter as the author of a regular column entitled "Letter from London" that appeared in *Maclean's* back when it was a general interest magazine.

⁴ James Babbage, "Montgomery's presentation of his plans for D-Day: a case of consent and evade?" *Defence Studies* 11, 4 (2011): 657-671.

⁵ French, David (2003) 'Invading Europe: The British army and its preparations for the Normandy campaign, 1942-44', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 14: 2, 271-294. John Buckley,

These articles constituted an informed commentary on British politics and British affairs, written by a well-connected Canadian who had lived in Britain for many years and had become a prominent figure in the cultural life of London.

It may surprise readers today to be told that these columns, which appeared from 1936 to 1960, were very popular, at least until the late 1950s. Why was this so? Frank Underhill was undoubtedly correct when he said in his fourth Massey Lecture in 1969 that Baxter “had a genius for creating in the minds of thousands of ordinary Canadians the feeling, through his fascinating picture of life and politics among the top people in England, that they were participating in these great events, sharing great decisions, living at the centre of things.” And Canada was still a very British country in those days, despite the growing frustrations of Quebec and the arrival in the postwar years of hundreds of thousands of immigrants from Europe (which everyone then understood did not include Britain). Britain was still the cultural centre of the world for most Canadians.

Underhill went on to claim that the cancellation of Baxter’s column in 1960 marked “the date at which the long-settled habit of looking to Britain” came to an end. That’s an over-simplification, of course, because Canada was already changing in the late 1950s. The Suez crisis sharply divided Canadians between those who continued to look to Britain for leadership and those who recognized that Canada had become a North American nation, while the election of John Diefenbaker represented a significant change in federal politics and the election of Jean Lesage quickly made clear that Quebec’s relationship with Canada was about to change dramatically. It was not long before symbols identified with Canada’s British heritage began to disappear and the maple leaf flag replaced the old red ensign.

Beverley Baxter was but one of the casualties of the wave of change sweeping over Canada. Truth be told, he was not actually a very important figure in either Canada or Britain but he remains of interest because in the period from the early 1920s to the middle of the 1950s he was one of the most prominent exponents of a united empire or, failing that, at least the continuation of a closely collaborative Commonwealth under British leadership. As we know, this placed him on the wrong side of history, but the struggle between those who believed that Canada could be most useful in the world through its membership in the Commonwealth and those who thought Canada should embrace its inherent identity as a North American nation and

close ally of the United States was one of the most important public questions of the time.

Beverly Baxter led a charmed life, due no doubt to his intelligence, ambition and personality. Born in Toronto, he quit school at fifteen and went to work. After a brief stint as an office boy he talked his way into a job selling pianos and not only did well at it but soon became personal assistant to the owner of the company. This impressive beginning was the prelude to the rest of his career. When he joined the Canadian army in 1916 he went in as a lieutenant despite his lack of education or militia experience, apparently because a relative had influence. His war experience was mercifully brief: he arrived in England in May 1917, did not go to France until March 1918, then contracted pleurisy and was back in England within three months. When he recovered he was assigned to training duties at Bexhill until being posted in December to the War Records Office. This was fortuitous because after being demobilized he promptly returned to London, managed to get an interview with Lord Beaverbrook, and landed a job on the *Daily Express*. By 1924 he was its managing editor and over the next nine years he more than doubled the paper's circulation. Just as importantly, being ambitious and no fool, he became Beaverbrook's loyal right-hand man, totally supporting and expounding his strong imperialist views.

Although he left the *Daily Express* in 1933, he continued to support Beaverbrook's political views from the House of Commons, to which he was elected in 1935, and in the 600 columns that he published in *Maclean's* magazine between 1936 and 1960. These columns were, as Thompson says, "no mere record of events or relatively disinterested commentary but were infused with a passionate belief in the close identity of Canada and Britain, a fervent advocacy of imperial unity until 1956, and a strong Conservative political, social, and economic outlook." (p. 6) After the Suez crisis and the fall of Anthony Eden in 1956, he abandoned imperialism and supported Britain's application to join the Common Market, on the assumption of course that Britain would become the leader of Europe. Beaverbrook, his longtime patron, never spoke to him again.

This book is not a biography of Beverly Baxter, although it does contain biographical information. Rather, it examines the image of Britain that he presented to Canadians in his letters, which were a kind of public diary, commenting on political events and personalities. Baxter knew everybody who mattered because he was a social

climber of the worst kind, sneering for example at Roy Thomson when he became Lord Thomson of Fleet because he had no “polish or grace” (p. 352). He was also a sycophant who blindly fluttered behind the flame of power. Thus, for more than thirty years he supported Beaverbrook’s quixotic campaign for empire unity—although, to be fair, he probably did actually believe in it—but he also supported appeasement in the 1930s and backed Neville Chamberlain right up to the very day he was driven from office, then immediately switched to Churchill. He supported Anthony Eden throughout the Suez crisis, then when Churchill advised the Queen to appoint Harold Macmillan prime minister instead of the widely anticipated R. A. Butler, Baxter immediately supported him as well. His loyalty to the Churchill wing of the Conservative party earned him a knighthood in 1954.

Even though Baxter enjoyed a charmed life in most respects—a successful business career and a moderately successful career as a writer, social status, political office, an apparently happy marriage—he remains in at least one respect a pathetic figure because he not only backed the wrong horse when he tied his public career to imperial unity when that concept was already passé, he lived long enough to realize it.

This is an interesting and useful book, although the title is perhaps somewhat misleading because the book is really about Baxter’s failed imperial dream. It also seems odd that the cover photograph is of Churchill and Beaverbrook, when one would have expected it to be of Baxter and Beaverbrook. Is it possible that no such photograph exists, and if so, what does that tell us of their relationship? Indeed, rather more biographical information on Baxter and his relationships would have enriched the book. This might have replaced what some might consider the excessively lengthy accounts of British politics included in order to justify Baxter’s commentaries on them. More vigorous editing might have focused the book more on the topic. Still, this remains a useful book on a topic that does not receive the attention it deserves, and Thompson’s elegant style makes it highly readable.

BRIAN DOUGLAS TENNYSON, *CAPE BRETON UNIVERSITY*