

Neville Thompson. *The Third Man: Churchill, Roosevelt, Mackenzie King and the Untold Friendships that Won WWII*. Toronto: Sutherland House, 2021. Pp. 498.

William Lyon Mackenzie King remains an historical figure of much intrigue and contradictions. Even though Canadian scholars have offered only a haphazard study of our prime ministers in comparison to most countries, especially the United States and Britain, the failure throughout much of the twentieth century to explore King's long career was especially egregious. While there were a handful of foundational studies by historians like Blair Neatby in the 1960s and J. L. Granatstein in the 1970s, since Charles Stacey's eviscerating 1976 exploration, *A Very Double Life*, King has usually been reduced to a clownish figure who sought guidance from his dead mother, dog and other departed luminaries. "Weird Willie" became the joke of Canadian history, even as that caricature was not easy to square with his over twenty-one years as prime minister, the longest in the British Empire. But starting in the twenty-first century, some fifty years after his death in 1950, there have been additional and more balanced studies of King that examined his contributions, strengths and weaknesses, especially by historians like Norman Hillmer, David Dilks, Allan Levine, Christopher Dummitt and this reviewer. It can no longer be said that King is forgotten, but he remains a figure worthy of historical exploration.

Neville Thompson, an emeritus professor of history at the University of Western Ontario and author of several histories of the British Empire, examines the intertwined relationship of King with Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. All led their countries during the Second World War, facing tremendous pressure and personal strain. All were connected by education, bearing, power and the weight of leadership. They had other historic relationships that tied them together, not the least being they were all close to their mothers. Two were great orators (Churchill and Roosevelt), while King was in power twice as long as either of them. There is good reason to examine their lives through a common lens.

And that lens is King's astonishing diaries, which he kept for most of his adult life and span some 30,000 pages. These diaries are the single most important written documentation from an individual Canadian, offering King's insight into nearly every aspect of his political and private life. It is through King's written observations that the author seeks to provide a new perspective on the other Second

World War leaders. And yet King's diaries—although revealing and fascinating—are highly problematic records. King used them as a record but also as a place where he tried to sort out his complex experiences of the day. In the pages, he raged at slights, he presented conspiracies, he coloured events to his own taste and he laid out his inner anxieties and great hopes. King was, not surprisingly, the star of his own story. That is not to say the diaries cannot be used, only that they must be understood as the product of the man and a reflection of both events as he saw them and as he wished to see them. In relying on them almost solely for the spine of this history, Thompson leaves himself vulnerable to King's version of history. While Thompson is too good an historian to know when King is shading the truth, employing the diaries as the narrative spine leads to some strange emphasis in the book as well as some odd claims. For example, it is surprising to read that King, who had guided the country through the Second World War, wrote about his conveying of news from the Gouzenko Affair in 1945 to be his "largest and most important world mission" (p. 15). This is one of many cases in his diary where the prime minister was offering his thoughts on the day, something that would surely have changed if he had written his memoirs with more time to reflect on his place in history.

To Churchill and Roosevelt, King was very much a third wheel, although Thompson's characterisation as the 'Third Man' is more charitable. And yet King had a long and surprising relationship with both leaders that stretched back many years. Roosevelt genuinely liked King's company, partially because he was a good listener and also because the Canadian had little skin in the American political game. Churchill had to bite back his bile when he talked to King, finding him weak, smarmy and untrustworthy, although he warmed to him a little later in the war. In turn, King felt that Churchill was a dangerous warlord, although he respected his political leadership during the dark days of the war and sought to support him whenever possible. Thompson offers a narrative-driven story of the complex three-way relationship, a somewhat familiar take on the Atlantic Triangle thesis.

There is much to like in this book, with almost every major event of the Second World War covered through King's eyes. It would be ungenerous to call this an annotated version of the King diaries, although the narrative presented here rigorously follows the structure and outline of the diary. It is a strength in so far as we encounter much of King's direct observations through quotations, gaining an appreciation

from the eyewitness. But the weakness is in the relentless narrative through which Thompson fails to extend his analysis beyond that of presenting the diary entry. For example, he makes very little of King's visit to Hitler in Germany in 1937, a cringe-worthy and delusional mission by the Canadian prime minister. Nor does he explore King's skillful manoeuvring of having Canada enter the war in September 1939. The importance of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, both to King and to the Canadian war effort, is vastly underplayed. Thompson also misses the mark in evaluating the devastating impact of the death of King's primary advisers, O. D. Skelton in 1940 and Ernest Lapointe in 1941, with the prime minister feeling absolutely lost without them. At the same time, their crucial support of King receives far too little treatment. There are other omissions. However, Thompson succeeds in not falling into the trap of overplaying King's attraction to spiritualism and seances. While Thompson should have delved deeper into the important role this mystic belief played in King's life—helping to confirm decisions he had already made, for instance, or providing soothing guidance in times of stress—he does not get carried away as many have in the past, especially in drawing out King's faith in the power of clock arms, his wild dreams that he took to be visions and his turn to the spiritual world.

*The Third Man* is a good read and the diary, as the author notes, “illuminates the tenor of the conversations and negotiations, the restraints under which they operated, their earnest desire for agreement, and the compromises by which policy was made” (p. 3). While the book does not shift any historiographical debates, it adds nuance to the characters of Churchill, Roosevelt and King. Its place in the historiography is perhaps a reminder that historians need to do a better job in the continual exploration of the country's leaders and where and how Canada supported the great powers in the struggle against fascism. In his own unheroic way, King positioned Canada to play an outsized role in this necessary war against Hitler and the Nazis, while keeping the country's independence of action where possible. He did not always succeed and he lacked strategic vision, but perhaps King's own words offer guidance: “The best way to help England, is to set up Canada” (p. 55). Indeed, the third man that was King was always his own man and Canada emerged from the Second World War better for his successful leadership.