Biography humanizes history. It makes what are often complex, impersonal, and abstract matters tangible for those who seek some understanding of the society in which they live. Biography, therefore, is a good prism through which to explore popular attitudes of a nation’s history. People look to biographies to examine and re-examine the past. And in the case of Canada, a nation that is perpetually unsure of its identity, biography often plays a role in the quest to define or understand the Canadian identity. Because so much is invested in biographical writing, the measure of a biography’s quality or importance is not merely a matter of assessing the biographer’s ability to recreate a person’s life as it was lived. Often the biography is assessed according to what it tells Canadians about who they are, where they have been, and why they have come to a certain point in history.

A few years ago, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) undertook a national search to discover the greatest Canadian. Through a series of TV programs, CBC engaged Canadians in a debate about the contributions and significance of a wide range of well-known Canadian citizens. The lives of those being considered were presented to viewers by familiar public figures, such as television journalists Rex Murphy and George Stroumboulopoulos, actor and filmmaker Paul Gross, and author Charlotte Gray. Viewers voted
David Marshall

for the person they thought was most worthy of the title. This exercise in populist hero-making led to a storm of controversy, demonstrating both the virtues and perils of using biography as a means to understand the national historical experience. The eventual winner of the contest was Saskatchewan CCF Premier Tommy Douglas, the conscience of social reform and an exponent of the social gospel and democratic socialism in post–World War II Canada. Douglas’s pioneering role in introducing a system of universal public health insurance over the protests of the medical doctors in Saskatchewan was the major reason for his emergence in the public mind as the greatest Canadian. Critics of CBC’s process were not surprised by this outcome, for it revealed much about contemporary social concerns. At the time, Canada’s national public health care system was in crisis and under serious scrutiny; some thought that it was no longer fiscally sustainable and therefore should be reformed, if not entirely dismantled. Douglas had become a weapon in the debates over the sustainability and wisdom of Canada’s health care system.

The most controversial aspect of CBC’s quest to identify the greatest Canadian, however, was the network’s mini-series about Douglas titled *Prairie Giant: The Tommy Douglas Story*. This docudrama indulged in some of the worst failings of biography, including the tendency to attribute far too much to the subject of any biography and thus heroize the subject while demonizing anyone who stands in the way or is an adversary. In *Prairie Giant*, Douglas’s political opponent, Saskatchewan Liberal leader Jimmy Gardiner, is presented as a hard-drinking thug. Such a characterization grossly misrepresents Gardiner’s personal attributes and moral code. He was a Presbyterian, one of the signatories of the United Church of Canada, an advocate and supporter of Prohibition, and a teetotaler himself. At the same time, the less noble qualities of Douglas’s life, such as his advocacy of eugenics in the 1930s, were overlooked.

A challenge to CBC’s “greatest Canadian” quest was undertaken by another popular forum for Canadian history, *The Beaver: Canada’s History Magazine*. Instead of seeking the greatest Canadian, the editors asked readers and a panel of Canadian historians to identify “the worst Canadian.” Not surprisingly, some of those selected as CBC’s “greatest Canadians” were also chosen as “the most contemptible” by the readers of *The Beaver*. Canada’s recent prime ministers—Mulroney, Chrétien, and Harper—were all selected for the magazine’s rogues gallery. But Pierre Trudeau, who was on CBC’s top ten
list, was catapulted to the place of lowest esteem and selected as the most “contemptible Canadian” by the magazine’s readers. His darkened profile graced the cover of the magazine. This gallery of prime ministers was joined by the predictable mass murderers and other controversial characters, such as the discredited entrepreneur Conrad Black and abortion crusader Henry Morgentaler.

One of *The Beaver*’s expert panelists also selected a figure from CBC’s top ten list. Native advocate and Cree historian Winona Wheeler selected John A. Macdonald for his callous treatment of Native and Métis people. Her condemnation of Macdonald and his policies was devastating. Identifying him as the “oppressive” prime minister, she wrote:

Under Macdonald’s government breaches of treaty obligations, starvation, negligence and manipulation fanned Indian and Métis fears, culminating in the 1885 Indian Treaty Grievance Movement and Métis Resistance. The resulting Canadian military campaigns ended in the largest mass hanging of Indians in Canada, the execution of Métis leader Louis Riel, and the imprisonment of many more Métis and Indian people. The Métis were dispersed, and Indian people were subjected to oppressive policies under the Indian Act…. Thousands of Indian and Métis people were left destitute and leaderless, but Macdonald got his Canadian Pacific Railway.5

Of course, this is a gross oversimplification of the complicated situation that Macdonald and his government had to deal with in the late nineteenth-century Canadian west. But it nicely demonstrates the crucial role biography can play in the task of challenging comfortable national or social myths and in generating debate.6 Wheeler’s view of Macdonald contrasts sharply with the view of Macdonald as the leading father of Confederation and nation-builder that was immortalized in Donald Creighton’s magisterial two-volume biography published in the 1950s. In a fascinating twist of fate, the arch-villain in Creighton’s biography was Métis leader Louis Riel, who challenged Macdonald’s vision of a transcontinental nation in both the Red River Resistance of 1870 and the North-West Rebellion of 1885. As Canadian society was becoming more self-consciously aware of its identity and character and thus more open to minority rights, ethnicity, and the country’s Native heritage, Riel the villain was transformed into the new heroic figure of Canadian
history. He was portrayed as a spokesman for Métis and Native rights, for the protection of the French language and Catholic religion, and for the aspirations of the west. He was the defender of minority rights of all descriptions in Canadian society. The villain became a hero and the hero was being vilified. Biography plays a role in the shaping, maintaining, and revising of a nation’s self-image. Biographies of nation-builders are at the very centre of a nation’s self-image.

These exercises in popular history and biography reveal the shortcomings of using biography as a way to understand Canada. By focusing on the individual, the broader responsibility for injustices—or, conversely, the sacrifices made by other Canadians—can be overlooked. Indeed, one of the panelists for *The Beaver* refused to name a particular individual. Instead, John Herd Thompson of Duke University selected “common Canadians” for their support and duplicity in the residential schools that systematically undermined Native culture, health, and family life. But despite scholarly dismissal of biography, it endures and remains one of the more popular and accessible ways for citizens to explore their nation’s history and society. Biography is essential to any liberal democratic society. As Nigel Hamilton asserts in his recent historical overview of biography, “the pursuit of biography, controversial in its challenge to received ideas of privacy and reputation since ancient times, is integral to the Western concept of individuality and the ideals of democracy.”

Biography plays a central role in democratic societies, for it is a forum for public debate about a broad range of issues. Biography makes debates concrete because people can more readily identify with individuals and personalities than with abstract concepts such as tolerance or identity. As the searches for the greatest or most despicable Canadian indicate, biography has the ability to reach into popular culture through book sales, magazines, and TV shows. It is not merely part of academic discourse. In Canada, biography has always been at the very centre of the illusive Canadian search for identity. The nature of biographical writing as well as its subject matter has always reflected broader political realities, social concerns, and cultural trends.

As early as the Confederation era, Canadians began to deliberate on what kind of a nation they were creating. Between 1862 and 1903, nine different biographical dictionaries, three of them multivolume, were produced in Canada. The first of these was H. J. Morgan’s *Sketches of Celebrated Canadians* (1862) with 424 entries. A picture of Canada’s development from colony to
nation emerged from the entries. An individual’s contributions to political and military events such as the War of 1812, the constitutional development of Upper and Lower Canada, and the more recent political debates were the criteria for selection. The sketches were primarily of generals and colonial politicians. The more modest three-volume *Portraits of British Americans* (1865–68), edited by J. F. Taylor, was dedicated to those politicians who had played a prominent role in the confederation debates. Through these biographical sketches, Taylor produced an early history of Confederation. The broader purpose in these enterprises was to inform readers about exemplary individuals who were builders of the Canadian nation. Each entry was accompanied by photographic portraits. Cochrane assumed that the photographs illustrated the “intimate connection between the features and expression of the face and the qualities and habit of mind.”10 The accomplishments of the subjects were tied directly to character traits. The biographies were designed to serve as lessons in achieving middle-class Victorian respectability.

Biographical writing in Victorian Canada reached a pinnacle with the publication of the twenty-volume Makers of Canada series, published in the early twentieth century. Each volume of approximately 250 pages was based on archival records and other primary sources, such as newspapers, but they were designed for the popular market.11 Early volumes were dedicated to the major figures in the history of New France and especially those men considered responsible for its major institutions, such as Bishop Laval and Governor General Frontenac. For the era of imperial rivalry from the conquest of New France to the end of the War of 1812, military figures such as Wolfe, Montcalm, and Sir Isaac Brock were featured. Most of the biographies of nineteenth-century figures focused on the politicians from the British North American colonies who were integral to constitutional developments, especially responsible government and confederation. Other volumes were dedicated to the explorers and governors who helped to open the west. The tone of the biographies was celebratory, and few, if any, notes of criticism were sounded. What was considered important was the subject’s public life and contribution to Canadian political and social development. The emphasis was on nation-building. For example, the authors of the biography of Egerton Ryerson, the architect of Ontario's public school system and advocate of the separation of church and state, explained that they “made no attempt, except in the first brief chapter, to trace the record, either of his personal or public
life, or the development of his character, or the lessons which might be gathered from the example of his life. We have rather considered his work as one of the makers of Canada, and necessarily with that, something of the great movements of the days in which he lived.”

The exception to the “great man” conventions that prevailed in the Makers of Canada series was the manuscript written by the career civil servant and iconoclastic thinker William Dawson LeSueur, who was also an editor of the series. With respect to the Upper Canadian reformer William Lyon Mackenzie, who led the 1837 rebellion, LeSueur suggests that he was a flawed human being whose overly passionate disposition impeded his ability to make a positive contribution to Canadian national development. He noted that Mackenzie adopted “methods more adapted to promote strife and discord than constitutional progress.” LeSueur was not only questioning the character of the hero of the rebellions of 1837; he was also questioning his contribution to Canadian history. He laid down the gauntlet against the myth of Mackenzie and the “great man” thesis with the observation that “had William Lyon Mackenzie never come to Canada, the old system of government would none the less, through the action of general courses, infallibly have given place to government of a more democratic type.” Such a statement contradicted the widely held belief that without Mackenzie and the Rebellion of 1837 in Upper Canada, responsible government would not have been achieved. According to LeSueur, social and political conditions were the key to understanding the achievement of responsible government, not the contribution of any one individual. By extension, LeSueur’s challenge to the “great man” thesis indicated that not many of the characters who had received special attention in the Makers of Canada series were indispensable to Canadian political and institutional development.

Little wonder, then, that George Morang, the publisher of the series, charged LeSueur with “destroy[ing] the usefulness of the rest of the series.” In a long letter to LeSueur, he outlined the parameters of Canadian public opinion with respect to what could be written about their leaders and historical figures: “I have always understood that there is an unwritten canon in the writing of biography, which demands from the biographer a certain amount of sympathy with the subject of the narrative. This I am afraid is entirely wanting in your estimate of Mackenzie and his struggle with the admittedly evil system of government which prevailed.” LeSueur’s biography would not be
 tolerated because “scant justice is done to Mackenzie’s virtues—to his highest and noblest qualities of head and heart.” LeSueur’s response indicates how far removed he was from the conventions of contemporary biography that Morang was determined to defend. In a letter to John L. Lewis, the author of the volume on the Reform politician George Brown in Morang’s Makers of Canada series, LeSueur wrote that he was opposed to writing anything that merely confirmed “popular opinion,” especially when the evidence pointed in another direction. The task of the biographer, he believed, was “to make the image vivid, to make the man live.” The biographer of Mackenzie, LeSueur contended, had to show “to what terrible excesses of scurrility he did not hesitate to give way . . . how little he cared about misleading the ignorant as to the conditions of public affairs; how his hatred of opponents completely dominated his interest in practical measures of reform; and then show how, in spite of all this, there was a sound core of humanity in the man; that he had a soul above mere party politics; that, unscrupulous as he was to means, he had, in the largest sense, good ends in view.”

LeSueur insisted that his biography was in fact a balanced account and that those who overlooked the underside or less-than-noble features of Mackenzie’s personality were indulging in myth-making. Canadians were able to tolerate criticism of its politicians in the cut and thrust of political debate but not in the canons of historical or biographical writing. William Lyon Mackenzie was regarded in the annals of nation-building historiography as one of the founders of responsible government and of the reform tradition in Canada; therefore, his character had to be above reproach in the literature. LeSueur’s sophisticated approach to biographical writing was far ahead of the times. Morang did not publish the manuscript in the Makers of Canada series; indeed, the manuscript was not published until 1979.

LeSueur’s manuscript remained mired in obscurity, and there were no challenges to the heroic tradition in Canadian biographical writing throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Donald Creighton’s two-volume biography of Sir John A. Macdonald, The Young Chieftain (1952) and The Old Politician (1955), stood out as the pinnacle of Victorian biography. In many ways, it read like a Victorian novel, with its florid prose and keen novelist’s sense of time, place, and character with regard to a particular moment or circumstance. Creighton continued the traditions of biographical writing that had begun with the Makers of Canada series. He combined the virtues of Makers of Canada...
dramatic narratives with the authoritative reliance on documentary evidence that characterized the “life and times” approach that emerged in the interwar years. In contrast to the volumes in the Makers of Canada series, however, in the political narrative of Creighton’s biography Macdonald’s personal life was fully integrated with his public life. Creighton presented Macdonald’s private life as evidence to explain the qualities and force of his character that were behind his contributions on the national political stage. In this regard, the conventions of Victorian biography were not challenged. Few notes of criticism or harsh lights were allowed into the portrait or exploration of personal life. If there were any uncomfortable facts, they were glossed over. But while other authors who used the life and times approach tried to disappear and allow the subject’s own voice to prevail through letters and other documents, Creighton’s voice intruded throughout his life of Macdonald to the point where readers had trouble discerning Macdonald from Creighton.

The task of understanding Creighton, therefore, is almost as necessary for reaching an understanding of Canada, and certainly of the mid-twentieth century, as it is for understanding Macdonald. To this end, Creighton’s biographer, Donald Wright, argues that the caricature of Creighton as temperamental, intolerant, francophobic, and basically unlikeable needs to be revised with a “proper biography” because he was “too important a figure in the intellectual, cultural, and political history of this country to ignore.” Wright indicates that the caricature of Creighton is only part of the story, as is every caricature. Creighton was a remarkably complicated man and someone who struggled, like many Canadians did, with disappointment and concerns about the future of the nation. When Canada, under the direction of the Liberal Party, was redefined, with little reference to its British heritage, as a bilingual and multicultural nation, Creighton got angry and lashed out against what he considered to be a betrayal of what Macdonald had created at Confederation. But this anger was rooted in grief. “[H]e grieved so for Canada,” his wife wrote after his death.” Creighton was a voice for the looming concern about the future of Canada that lurked underneath the brimming confidence of the 1950s. Canada was changing: it was becoming more strongly oriented within North America, Québec and the west were beginning to assert themselves, Métis and Native peoples were undergoing a cultural and demographic renewal, and Canada was becoming far more multicultural.
On the one hand, Creighton’s biography of Macdonald was a nostalgic book, for it looked back to the certainties of an English-speaking Canada that was quietly being transformed into something quite different. On the other hand, the popularity and critical acclaim that the book enjoyed rested in the fact that Creighton’s vision of Macdonald was consistent with the confident Canadian national feeling of the 1950s. Canada had emerged from World War II with a renewed sense of purpose and optimism. The country’s contribution to the war and its postwar diplomacy and prosperity fostered a real sense of national achievement and destiny. One issue that troubled Canadians was that of the Americanization of the Canadian economy and culture. Creighton’s portrait of Macdonald ameliorated their concerns about Canada’s sovereignty and identity: Macdonald emerged as a politician who had the vision to create a new Dominion that averted the perils of the American constitution by insisting on a strong central government and that resisted American commercial and expansionist designs through its national policies. In Donald Creighton’s hands, Macdonald became the grand orchestrator of a transcontinental Canada. It was his vision, his skill, his ability that ensured the success of the young Dominion.

The appeal of Creighton’s Macdonald, however, went beyond the particular dilemma facing Canadians about their national identity. Creighton was an eloquent exponent of the biography as a way to understand the human condition: “I think an historian’s chief interest is in character and circumstance. His concern is to discover the hopes, fears, anticipations and intentions of the individuals and nations he is talking about. His task is to reproduce as best he can the circumstances, problems and situations faced by another person in another time. He seeks insight and understanding that cannot be gained through the application of sociological rules and general explanations.” In the 1950s, people were anxious to see historical change as the product of individual actions and choices. This recognition of the role of the individual in history was important to the generation who lived under the shadow of World War II and the Holocaust, and who experienced the threat of the Cold War. At a time when the perils of ideologies such as Nazism, fascism, or communism were dangerously apparent, history that emphasized the role of the individual was part of the arsenal of liberal democracies in their battle against these forces of tyranny that robbed people of their freedom of choice. “History is not made by inanimate forces and human automations,” Creighton explained;
“it is made by living men and women, impelled by an endless variety of ideas and emotions, which can best be understood by that insight into character, that imaginative understanding of people, which is one of the attributes of literary art.”

This biographical approach to Canadian history was institutionalized in the 1950s with the creation of the Dictionary of Canadian Biography, an ambitious collaborative scholarly enterprise. The Dictionary was the brainchild of James Nicolson, a philanthropist who believed that Canada would benefit from a comprehensive biographical dictionary of “noteworthy inhabitants of the Dominion of Canada.” In keeping with Nicolson’s objectives, the editors requested that contributors “leave the reader with a definite impression of the personality and achievements of the subject in relation to the period in which he lived and the events in which he participated.” Nicolson’s wish was to create a biographical dictionary that would help readers understand that Canada’s past harkened back to its Victorian predecessors as much as it looked forward to modern scholarship; he insisted on a complete and impartial realistic portrait that indicated “strengths weaknesses, success and failure” in assessing the subject’s life and contribution to Canada. This seemed to be a “golden age” of biography in Canada, with the launching of the Dictionary of Canadian Biography in 1959 and the publication of numerous critically acclaimed political biographies—aside from Creighton’s, most notably J.M.S. Careless’s two-volume biography of George Brown of the Globe and Kenneth McNaught’s eloquent biography of J. S. Woodsworth, the founder of the CCF.

But just as the Dictionary of Canadian Biography was getting off the ground in the early 1960s, the certainties surrounding biographical writing in Canada came crashing down. Profound change that shook Canadian society to its foundations occurred in many areas, including the arts and letters. A general mood that questioned almost every aspect of Canadian society, including its political traditions and the certitudes of Victorian morality and respectability, prevailed. Things that would once have been considered scandalous or even sacrilegious were tolerated and seriously considered by an increasing number of Canadians in the 1960s. A good barometer of the new cultural values, which propelled further change, was the more liberal understanding of what constituted obscenity in Canadian society. Controversy was launched by the presence on Canadian newsstands of a new edition of Lady Chatterley’s Lover, a novel that had been considered obscene since its publication in 1928.
In Montreal, the morality squad raided newsstands and seized copies of the novel. A local judge found *Lady Chatterley's Lover* to be obscene, ruled that the police action was lawful, and ordered the confiscation of the remaining copies of the offensive book. This ruling was unanimously upheld by the Québec Court of Appeal and ultimately the case was heard before the Supreme Court of Canada in 1962. In a narrow decision, the Supreme Court overturned the ruling of the lower courts and defined new grounds for obscenity. It was not sufficient, the justices argued, to quote certain passages containing foul language or descriptions of sexual activity and declare the work obscene. To prove that undue exploitation of sex is a dominant characteristic of any work, they reasoned, the whole book in its entirety and not certain isolated passages must be considered. Moreover, they declared that to discern whether the dominant characteristic of a book was obscene, the intention or purpose of the author must also be considered. Artistic and literary merit had to be taken into account. Judicial decisions alone cannot change literary traditions, but in this case, the decision signalled a more open and tolerant attitude that was emerging in Canadian society about what could be discussed, written, and printed.

Soon after the Supreme Court decision, an early indication of the changing atmosphere was the publication of Peter C. Newman's *Renegade in Power*. What was significant about Newman's book was that he laid the responsibility for the indecision, confusion, and chaos of the Diefenbaker administration squarely at the feet of Diefenbaker; more specifically, he attributed it to Diefenbaker's personality. It was a flaw not in his managerial style but rather in his character that was responsible for the paranoid style of politics that characterized his government. It was becoming clear that no longer would a veil of secrecy protect concerns about propriety and respectability. Biography was ultimately transformed in this process of cultural reorientation.

One of the most dramatic examples of this new spirit came from the pen of a distinguished historian, C. P. Stacey (born in 1906), whose own life was rooted in the Victorian respectability of the early twentieth century. Stacey was familiar with the Mackenzie King Papers; they included King's diary, which he kept almost religiously on a daily basis from the time he was a student at the University of Toronto in the early 1890s to the end of his life in 1950. Much to Stacey's delight, this intensely private diary was remarkably candid and detailed about personal matters, particularly family life and King's
mother, his many women friends, and, perhaps most sensational of all, his involvement with the world of spiritualism. Stacey understood that little was known about Mackenzie King's life outside of politics, and he decided to write a book about his fascinating private life. As Stacey explained in his own memoirs, "At an earlier day this simply would have been 'not done.' Twenty years before, I should not have dreamed of doing it myself. But times, and public taste, had changed." He also understood that "no conspiracy of silence was going to last long and in any case it seemed to me that conspiracies of silence were out of date."

Stacey hoped to shed light on the conundrum of Mackenzie King's character. In public life and politics, he was rational, skilful, shrewd verging on ruthless, and highly successful. In his private life, he allowed the superstitious to influence him; he was frequently very emotional to the point of becoming irrational; and in terms of his relationships with women, especially in relation to marriage, he had failed. Stacey's exposé was published under the provocative title *A Very Double Life: The Private World of Mackenzie King*, a reference to one of the more revealing and introspective excerpts in the diary. After yet another episode in which the young Mackenzie King had to fight off the temptations of the flesh, he had written:

There is no doubt I lead a very double life. I strive to do right and continually do wrong. Yet I do not do the right I do to make it a cloak for evil. The evil that I do is done unwillingly, it comes of the frailty of my nature, I am sorry for it…. I fear I am much like Peter, I deny my Lord when the maid smiles at me, but with God's help I will overcome even this temptation.

This reference to the temptations of evil fighting against King's desire to follow the Lord and lead an upstanding Christian life captures the theme of the book perfectly. It is not a flattering portrait of King. He is portrayed as a tortured soul, at best, if not a habitual hypocrite in his personal life. Throughout the book, Stacey presents King as a man who pursued women, sometimes obsessively; befriended other men's wives; and communicated with deceased "dear ones" and political celebrities through seances. *A Very Double Life* smashed the convention that a public figure's personal life was "private" and that only the public record mattered. Somehow, the book made King more attractive but also somewhat comic and even pathetic.
Although Stacey had a serious intent for his exposé of King’s “very double life,” the book became the subject of media frenzy. The *Toronto Star* had received the right to publish excerpts of the book in advance of its publication. With its eye on mass readership, the *Star* printed the most sensational sections.41 The documentary references and Stacey’s careful explanations of background and historical context were not published, so the book appeared to be little more than an exercise in cheap gossipmongering. In Stacey’s own words, the excerpts were “crude.”42 While many Canadians enthused over the fact that in boring Canada, where nothing of interest happened, there could be scandal and sex involving its usually dull politicians, others were outraged. In his memoirs, Stacey comments that many Canadians were still of the mind that “the conspiracy of silence should have continued.”43 More substantial criticism suggested that Stacey’s prurient obsession with the women in Mackenzie King’s life had misled him and that he had overlooked many of the more telling aspects of his personal life. So much was missing with respect to King’s private life that the reviewer for the *Canadian Historical Review* remarked that the book was little more than an “excursion on the margins of the biographical lake.”44 Stacey was charged with being superficial in his exclusive focus on the women in King’s life, his beloved Irish terriers, and his flirtation with seances and spiritualism. Whatever the verdict on Stacey’s book, it clearly signalled the end of the Victorian insistence on propriety and respectability. Moreover, it was abundantly apparent that restricting biographical detail to the public record, as was done in the official multivolume biography of Mackenzie King, was inadequate for understanding public figures.45

Questions relating to the most private matters and intimate activities, such as marriage and sexuality, were no longer exclusively in the private sphere; they were part of public discourse in post-1960s Canada. Canadians were vigorously debating legislation relating to divorce, human reproduction, and sexual orientation. In announcing amendments to the Criminal Code that included the Divorce Reform Bill and measures decriminalizing abortion and homosexual acts between consenting adults, the minister of Justice, Pierre Elliot Trudeau, famously quipped that “there was no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation.” Perhaps so, but this more liberal attitude toward marriage, family life, and sexuality meant that what had been fiercely private became public. Indeed, the *Divorce Act* of 1968, sponsored by Trudeau
David Marshall

as Justice minister, was one of the many pieces of social legislation indicating that the grasp of the old Victorian belief systems had finally been broken. The social dimension of the human experience was also critical to understanding what it meant to be Canadian. The personal was now political, and biographies that fully integrated personal life with public life only reflected this trend.

It was therefore ironic in the extreme that Trudeau was subjected to a terribly public and painful divorce in the late 1970s. Trudeau's marriage became the subject of a sensational memoir by his ex-wife, who commented extensively on their marriage and the reasons for the marital breakdown. Margaret Trudeau's *Beyond Reason* was one of the first memoirs to discuss the most private matters of marital sexuality and divorce openly. In his recent biography of Trudeau, John English interweaves Trudeau's public and private life so effectively that new revelations and insights about his life emerge. For example, English demonstrates that Trudeau's electoral defeat in 1979 at the hands of the hapless Joe Clark was in no small part the result of his declining passion for politics and public life. He was tired, bitter, depressed, and overwhelmed by his collapsed marriage. Although plenty was known about Trudeau before English's biography, as journalist Paul Wells points out, his private and public life “had tended to be kept separate” in the many previous biographies. “But,” Wells protests, “nobody lives like that…. Every life is a whole, and English treats Trudeau’s prime ministerial career as a whole to an extent none of his predecessors did.” In English's biography, the integration of public and private allows readers to understand Trudeau the man as well as his political career with more sensitivity and to see that his personal life, in some ways deeply tragic, had a profound impact on his political career and his stewardship of the nation. Exploration of the most private matters cannot be neglected, for it can shed light on some of the most public matters. Any insistence that biography should primarily be about public life cannot be sustained.

There are, however, important matters of propriety that must be taken into account. What is perhaps the final frontier of privacy relates to the most secretive of activities: extramarital affairs. Here again, the barriers have come down very slowly and painfully. On no other subject is the biographer so constrained by the feelings of the living and the memory of the dead. With respect to Prime Minister Pearson, his biographer, John English, was circumspect but
suggestive about his “affair” with Mary Greey, writing that “Mike found her thoroughly admirable and magnetic, and she was a scintillating companion in the absence of his family during those ‘siren years.’” Confronted with more concrete evidence, English was blunter in the second volume when discussing philosopher George Grant’s anti-Liberal 1963 polemic, *Lament for a Nation*. Here, English suggests that some of the bitter tone of Grant’s attack on the Liberal Party of Canada may have been rooted in the fact that “he believed that in London during the Blitz, Mary Greey had fallen in love with Mike and he with her,” and Grant was distressed by how Pearson had treated his family friend: Grant’s sister, Alison, had been Mary Greey’s flatmate in London. But, in a footnote, English clarifies things by muddying the waters. He notes that he interviewed people who were in a position to know about the relationship. The most important were Alison Grant and her future husband, George Ignatieff, who was a colleague and friend of Pearson. According to English, Alison indicated that “the extraordinary circumstance of the Blitz transformed” Mary and Mike’s “acquaintanceship into friendship.” She did not elaborate upon the nature of the friendship. She and George Ignatieff agreed that Mike became a much more private person after he returned to Canada, and, from then onwards, his life played out primarily in the public forum.51

Not surprisingly, William Christian, the biographer of George Grant, is much less circumspect about the affair, claiming without hesitation that Pearson and Greey were romantically involved.52 Of course, absolute certainty on this very private matter is impossible. As P. B. Waite reminds us in his sensitive discussion of “invading privacy,” the biographer need not, should not, be prurient, raking up scandal for titillation of contemporary taste: but neither ought he to blink it away. Should one not openly and candidly accept such evidence, judging it as part of a man’s life? I think so. The alternative seems unacceptable. Deliberate suppression of the essential is deliberate distortion. But there is a world of fighting in what constitutes essential.53

It is no small matter, in the case of Pearson, to understand that the leader who prodded and pushed Canadians to consider a new Canada that was not tied to old colonial traditions—through the Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, the recognition of multiculturalism, the building of the
welfare state, and the adoption of a new flag—also struggled in his personal life with the new post-Victorian social and moral realities of the late twentieth century. It also opens up the possibility of reaching some understanding that the source for new morality was rooted in the disruption of family life imposed on individuals by the demands and pressures of World War II. In this regard, the biographies of Pearson and Trudeau are much more than lives of national leaders; they are also lives of two individuals who dealt with the myriad of pressures, disruptions, and opportunities that many other Canadians, in some form or another, also faced in that era.

Despite the growing fascination with the private details of people's lives, it was often public life that still caused the greatest stir and interest. For example, the details of Trudeau's life that elicited the most commentary were those relating to his position on French-Canadian nationalism and separatism, not his prolonged bachelorhood or his many relationships with beautiful women. It came as a shock for many readers that Trudeau's youth, in the late 1930s, was characterized by obedience to his Jesuit teachers and ardent commitment to traditional French-Canadian nationalism, which included espousal of the anti-Semitism of the times and harbouring romantic dreams of leading French-Canadian youth in a military coup to establish an independent Québec. What is significant about this phase of his life is that when Trudeau organized his extensive personal archive, he did not destroy or bury this incendiary and incriminating material that clearly compromised his image as a “citizen of the world” who rejected nationalisms based on race, religion, or language. Perhaps Trudeau understood that this aspect of his life explained both the necessity of and his passion for entrenching the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in the Canadian Constitution. His youthful prejudices were poignant evidence of why he became so opposed to race-based definitions of nationalism and the “two nations” concept of Canada. It is easy enough to suggest reasons why Trudeau thought the Charter was necessary. Indeed, he suggested many of the reasons himself when he referred to the treatment of minorities in Québec under Duplessis and the internment of the Japanese during World War II. Trudeau understood that in a democratic multicultural nation such as Canada, fundamental freedoms could only be protected in law in a binding constitution. These considerations were rooted in the social and political history of the nation. But the best way to appreciate Trudeau’s passion about these matters and his willingness to play high-stakes politics in
order to achieve his goal and entrench the Charter of Rights and Freedoms is through his own past or his biography. One can go only so far in understanding the history of the nation through studying the grand sweep of political, social, intellectual, economic, or cultural history. There is a dimension of a country’s past that can only be appreciated and understood through the biography or the lives of its citizens.

One hundred years after the publication of the Makers of Canada series, a multivolume series of biographies of “extraordinary Canadians” was completed in 2011 under the editorship of John Ralston Saul. Much as in the Makers of Canada series, the purpose of this work is to explore the Canadian identity through biography. In introducing the series, Saul writes: “How do civilizations imagine themselves? One way is for each of us to look at ourselves through our society’s most remarkable figures.” Saul hastens to add, however, that the series is not an exercise in “hero worship or political iconography” but rather an attempt to understand those people from Canada’s past who seem to remain relevant for Canadians long after their deaths. “Their ideas, their triumphs and failures,” writes Saul, “all of these somehow constitute a mirror of our society. We look at these people, all dead, and discover what we have been, but also what we can be. A mirror is an instrument for measuring ourselves.” The editors of the Makers of Canada series would recognize the sentiment underlying Saul’s rationale. What would be shocking to the editors of the older series are the lives Saul selected. These Canadians were, to use Saul’s phrase, “people of the word.” In a clearly postmodernist explanation for his selection criteria, Saul argues that while civilizations or nations are built around many themes and actions, they also require a shared public language or a broadly understood narrative or discourse: “Words, words, words—it is around these that civilizations create and imagine themselves.”

It is instructive to compare the names in the Makers of Canada series with those in the Extraordinary Canadians series to consider the changes over the past century in Canadian biography and the Canadian identity. The editors of the earlier series would have been shocked that so few politicians, only four, were included in the later work. They would have been astounded by the number of literary figures and artists—Stephen Leacock, Lucy Maud Montgomery, Marshall McLuhan, and Mordecai Richler, Emily Carr, and Glenn Gould. Most shocking, indeed scandalous, for early twentieth-century Anglo-Protestant Canadians would be the presence of a volume dedicated to
the Cree chief, Big Bear, and another to Louis Riel and his military lieutenant, Gabriel Dumont, who in 1910 were considered little more than traitors, and violent, bloodthirsty ones at that. Also surprising would be the three women in the series: Lucy Maud Montgomery, Emily Carr, and Nellie McClung. The latter also represents the activist or reformist orientation, as does Norman Bethune, the activist medical missionary who worked alongside Mao during the 1949 revolution. Finally, from the world of sport, a volume on Maurice “Rocket” Richard has recently been added. Extraordinary Canadians is not dominated by politicians or military leaders. Indeed, there is not one military figure in the series except for the insurgent Métis, Gabriel Dumont. Canada’s World War I hero Arthur Currie is not included.

One of the most widely commented-upon volumes in the series is the biography of René Lévesque by Daniel Poliquin, a Franco-Ontarian and a federalist. He portrays Lévesque’s appeal as a politician both inside and outside of Québec’s borders with insight and sensitivity, for he understands the affection Canadians had for this vulnerable, all too human but fiercely democratic man. On the controversial question of separatism, however, Poliquin is devastating in his condemnation of Lévesque and the politics of separatism. With reference to the FLQ crisis and the killing of Pierre Laporte, Poliquin suggests that Lévesque was most concerned about the possibility that the FLQ’s radical militancy might destroy the sovereignist movement. He charged Lévesque with “intellectual dishonesty” and worse. “Overall, Lévesque’s take on the October Crisis was a political gambit of the vilest sort. He was not seeking the truth; he was trying to regain the political terrain he had lost. The polls were not good.” Lévesque shifted the blame for the crisis away from its terrorist perpetrators and onto Trudeau, the federal government, and the RCMP. This conspiracy theory, fostered by Lévesque, led to the perversion in politically correct Québec nationalist circles “to say that Laporte ‘died,’ which is a curious way to describe Paul Rose’s strangling of the minister with the chain of his scapular medal. But using the word died instead of the word murdered keeps Laporte’s abductors absolved.” For Poliquin, this absolution of the terrorist acts of October 1970 “was a callous perversion of the truth, and a technique Lévesque resorted to again in very different circumstances.” Of course, Poliquin is referring to the vague and, in his view, misleading wording of the 1980 referendum question. Poliquin’s assessment of Lévesque’s character is equally frank. He mentions that Lévesque had affairs, was a less than
devoted father, and handled money poorly. He was a likeable but seriously flawed individual. Poliquin suggests that Lévesque's immaturity was in part responsible for the failure of his political vision and certainly the failure of his tactics in his disputes with federalists such as Trudeau. The private and public are merged into a seamless web in this controversial biography.

Saul's selection of “extraordinary Canadians” can be criticized for reflecting the old Canada of Natives, Québécois, and members of the English-Canadian elite. The only volume on an immigrant or ethnic Canadian, representing the nation’s multicultural character, is the one on Mordecai Richler. Where one does see multicultural Canada is in the series' authors, who were selected for their proven ability to communicate with Canadians. They include Adrienne Clarkson, born in Hong Kong; Nino Ricci, from a Canadian family of Italian immigrants; M. G. Vassanji, born in Kenya; and Vincent Lam, from a Chinese community in Vietnam. Rudy Wiebe, who wrote the volume on Big Bear, is a deeply committed Mennonite, and Joseph Boyden, author of the dual biography of Riel and Dumont, is Métis.

The central importance of Canada’s multicultural character is reflected in two very recent biographies. Richard Gwyn’s second volume of his biography of John A. Macdonald, published in 2011, confirms that, although the veneration for Creighton’s earlier account of Macdonald’s life has by no means disappeared, it has at least reached the point where the clear limitations of Creighton’s achievement are recognized. Gwyn does not debunk what Creighton achieved. As H. V. Nelles points out in the Literary Review of Canada, Gwyn might have cavalierly rejected the Young Politician and the Old Chieftain, turning them on their heads, finding a yet unknown counter-Macdonald to unveil. In rejecting Creighton, for example, he might have taken a Strachey-esque tack … exposing the abundant vanity and readily displayed hypocrisy of his subject. The siren song of a psychobiography of a man of inexplicable ailments, tragic marriages, lost children, mad relatives, monstrous binges, and mysterious power over other men might have been tempting, especially with an eye to sales.

Instead Gwyn’s purpose is to provide a new generation of Canadians with a means to rediscover Macdonald. He portrays Macdonald differently than
Creighton did, seeing in him a man “as complex and contradictory as his own country.” Gwyn approvingly cites Goldwin Smith’s 1884 observation that Macdonald’s lifelong mission was “to hold together a set of elements, national, religious, sectional and personal, as motley as the component patches of any ‘crazy quilt.’” Macdonald understood diversity and the necessity of some degree of tolerance as central to the Canadian character. Gwyn points to Macdonald’s Scottish background as a main reason why he could appreciate the diversity of Canada. But more than this, Gwyn suggests, he understood that Canada was a nation in the making without a definite identity. He knew, perhaps like no other politician of his generation, that “for Canada to survive on its own, it had to demonstrate that it possessed the will and nerve it took for a nation to survive. Confederation was the essential means to that end.” In a statement that makes clear the importance of biography above all other studies in understanding the Canadian identity, Gwyn asserts that to understand Macdonald is to discover “where we came from and … why we are the way we are now, no matter all the transformational changes since—demographic, economic, technological, lifestyle.” Macdonald is somehow a transcendent figure.

No historian has made a more forthright, powerful defense of biography than American historian David Hackett Fischer. In his recent biography of Samuel de Champlain, whom Canadians consider the Father of New France, he informs readers that he began his inquiry with a set of open questions about Champlain: “Who was this man? Where did he come from? What did he do? What difference did he make? Why should we care?” These questions appear simple and straightforward, and indeed, they are. Moreover, they are questions that are basic to any biography. But they also led Fischer to a probing investigation and bold conclusions about the nature of Canadian society during its formative colonial period. He reveals Champlain as a man of the French Enlightenment. When Champlain arrived in the New World, he did not try to conquer, abuse, or drive the Natives out. Here, Fischer does not indulge in the much-maligned “great man” thesis but instead demonstrates that Champlain was a product of his times: “He came to maturity in a time of cruel and bitter conflict: forty years of religious strife, nine civil wars in France, and millions of deaths. As a soldier he had witnessed atrocities beyond description. After that experience, this war-weary soldier dreamed of a new world where people lived at peace with others unlike themselves.”
genuinely appalled at the cruelty, violence, and enslavement that Europeans had inflicted upon Native peoples. His dream was to create a new society where Native North Americans and newcomer Europeans could co-operate and thrive. Champlain strove to maintain close relations with First Nations people, often living among them, while establishing three francophone colonies and cultures—Québécois, Acadian, and Métis. A cornerstone of the Canadian character, Fischer observes, remains its French-speaking heritage. In revealing Champlain’s humanism and especially his respect for the values and traditions of other cultures, Fischer identifies one of the essential qualities that characterizes Canadian history and society: respect for minorities. The fact that Canadians increasingly view multiculturalism and tolerance as being at the core of the Canadian national character indicates that they have embraced “Champlain’s dream.”

In both Gwyn’s and Fischer’s recent biographies, respect for diversity is presented as a defining aspect of the lives of their subjects and, by extension, as a central component of the Canadian experience. Both biographers are reflecting contemporary Canadian attitudes as much as they may be shaping and deepening these attitudes. They have added a new dimension to the prevailing view of Canada as a multicultural nation. Although biographical writing has undergone significant change throughout Canadian history, its central role in assisting Canadians to ponder, debate, and revise their views of the Canadian experience and identity has not changed. Contemporary Canadians are more skeptical about human nature and certainly about the ability of any biography to be the final word on anyone’s life or character. But this greater skepticism aside, biography still holds a unique ability to provide a window through which readers can explore what it is to experience life in Canada.70

NOTES


6 Joining Macdonald in the rogues gallery of contemptible Canadians selected by the panel of historians was the Nazi firebrand from 1930s’ Québec, Adrian Arcand, anti-Catholic and anti-French journalist Edward Farrer, and racist Indian commissioners Duncan Campbell Scott and Joseph Trutch, among others. All these men represent a powerful and disturbing challenge to the prevailing mythology of a peaceable, tolerant Canadian society.


10 This principle was applied even more vigorously in H. J. Morgan, *Types of Canadian Women* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1903), where the often full-length photographs were designed to demonstrate that physical attractiveness, grace, and tasteful dress were signs of social standing and indications that the subject possesses qualities necessary for her contribution to family life and the community.


12 Nathanael Burwash and Alfred Henry Raynor, Egerton Ryerson (Toronto: Morang, 1909), preface (n.p.).


15 Ibid., 1.

17 George Morang to W. D. LeSueur, May 6, 1908, quoted in McKillop, A Critical Spirit, 273–75.
20 LeSueur was anticipating the challenges to Victorian biographical writing so brilliantly developed by Lytton Strachey in Eminent Victorians (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1918), a book of four biographical portraits that caused a scandal. Strachey humanized his subjects by “shattering the pretensions of Victorian morality” that surrounded them. They came alive because he exposed their pretensions, ambition, and hypocrisy.
28 There is a growing literature on the transformation in English-speaking Canada that was of such huge concern to Creighton, including Jose Igartua, The Other Quiet Revolution: National Identities in English Canada, 1845–71 (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006), and C. P. Champion, The Strange Demise of British Canada: The Liberals and Canadian Nationalism (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010). For Creighton’s lament, see Donald Creighton, Canada 1939–1957: A Forked Road (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), and Donald Creighton, Canada’s First Century


31 Quoted in Wright, “Reflections on Donald Creighton,” 24.


33 Directives to contributors, Dictionary of Canadian Biography, vol. 1, xvii.


38 C. P. Stacey, A Date with History: Memoirs of a Canadian Historian (Ottawa: Deneau, 1982), 262–63.

39 Ibid., 263.


41 Toronto Star, March 6–11, 1976.

42 Stacey, A Date with History, 264.

43 Ibid.


This point is developed in a more general way with regard to Canadian historiography in A. B. McKillop, “Who Killed Canadian History: A View from the Trenches,” Canadian Historical Review 80 (June 1999): 272, 297.

Margaret Trudeau, Beyond Reason (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1979).


Ibid., viii.

Ibid., ix.

Daniel Poliquin, René Lévesque (Toronto: Penguin, 2009), 126.

Ibid., 127.


See Gwyn, John A, 6.

Ibid., 3.

Goldwin Smith, quoted in Gwyn, John A, 2.

Gwyn, John A, 5.


Fischer, Champlain’s Dream, 528.

Ibid., 529.

See, for example, Michael Bliss, Right Honourable Men: The Descent of Canadian Politics from Macdonald to Mulroney (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1994), x.