

Granatstein's Norman Robertson

by John Starnes

Professor Granatstein has carried out an unusually difficult task with discrimination and sensitivity. While perhaps not the kind of book which will attract a wide audience it should appeal to all students of Canadian government and all those interested in Norman Robertson and his times. The author was wise not to attempt a full-scale biography or to attempt to make the book a comprehensive history of Canadian policies during the 25 year period when Robertson exercised influence.

Having been among those in 1974 to urge that an account of Robertson's contribution to Canadian foreign policy be written, and having been commissioned in late 1967 by the Department of External Affairs to determine if sufficient material existed to warrant sponsoring the kind of biography which Professor Granatstein has written, I am perhaps more aware than many of the difficulties he had to overcome. In February 1977, when I recommended that further work was warranted, I was well aware of the enormous gaps in the written record and the amount of vital material which could be recovered only through extensive research and time-consuming interviews. That Professor Granatstein has been able, in such a short time, to assemble so much material and to present it in such an interesting and clear manner is a tribute to his professional skill and his perseverance. (Incidentally, the author refers to the "Starnes Papers", a phrase suggesting I had made a private collection, which was not the case. The documents in question were unearthed during the study I was commissioned to undertake and were attached to my final report to External Affairs.)

Some of the material used by Granatstein offers tantalizing glimpses of Robertson's extraordinarily complex character. Yet, somehow these are never adequately developed. Norman Robertson had an earthy side to his nature; a lively, sometimes ribald, sense of

humour and a love of life which often surprised and delighted those who came in contact with him. These important aspects of Robertson's character appear somehow to have eluded his biographer. The book has not quite captured the essence or the ethos of the man. That at times Granatstein comes close to doing so is quite an accomplishment for a biographer who never personally knew his subject.

On this score, Granatstein writes: "His mother had a mystical streak, sometimes thinking she was gifted with 'second sight', but little of that . . . was passed down to Norman". I am not so sure. He could be fay and his breathtaking ability to link the abstract with reality and to make connections between quite disparate matters often seemed attributable to abnormal flashes of intuition. Nor do I quite subscribe to the statement that "the phenomenon of religious beliefs interested him because of the hold it had on people. On him it had none at all". His knowledge of comparative religion was comprehensive and I suspect his interest sometimes extended beyond mere intellectual curiosity.

It is unfortunate that criticisms of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) have been interpolated into some of the chapters. Norman Robertson would have felt such criticisms out of place and possibly unfair. From 1958 to 1962 I reported directly to Robertson on security and intelligence matters in External Affairs. I know that he disagreed with the RCMP and, at times, he could be among their severest critics. By the same token, I know that he was sympathetic, even protective. He understood well the problems created for the RCMP in attempting to carry out difficult, ill-defined roles, for which often they were inadequately prepared, with little or no ministerial guidance and against a general background of ministerial reluctance to become too involved.

In general, I found I like best the chapters dealing with subjects and periods of time in Robertson's life about which I knew the least. Thus, I enjoyed most those parts of the biography dealing with Robertson's early years, his years in London and with questions of trade, economics and tariffs. Indeed, I imagine the

Mr. Starnes is a former Assistant Under-secretary of State for External Affairs. In addition to serving as Ambassador to West Germany, Egypt and the Sudan, he was the first civilian Director-General of the RCMP Security Service.