

The Rt. Hon. Lester B. Pearson

Most men write their own obituaries in one way or another, but few do it literally.

The Rt. Hon. Lester B. Pearson, a Prime Minister of Canada, published the first volume of his *Memoirs* last fall, shortly before he died from cancer on Dec. 27.*

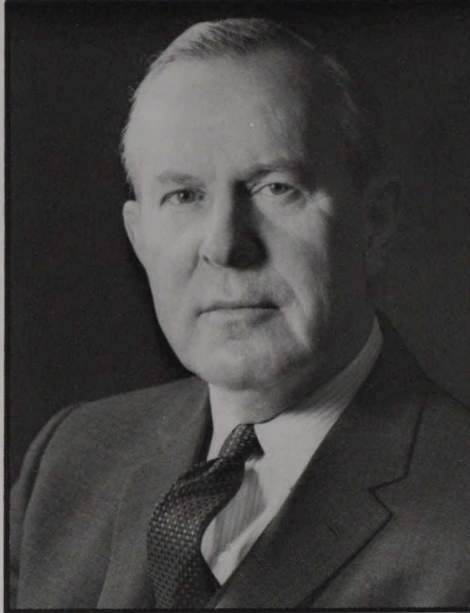
It is difficult to sum up a life in a few words on a tombstone and it is difficult to sum up a life like Pearson's even in a book. His life was, of course, history. His personal history; the history of his ilk, the anglo-Irish of Ontario; the history of his country in war and peace and the history of what has been loosely called the free nations.

Mr. Pearson wrote clearly — the one vital virtue when the writer has something to say. He wrote history that was more alive than the histories written by professionals because the professional is always writing about someone else's dead past. Mr. Pearson recreates that lost unhampered world and reports the subsequent transition toward uncertainty that has engulfed us all.

What follows are a few excerpts from Volume One. Some of the magic has been preserved, we hope, but at best only a bit. For Mr. Pearson's peculiar virtue as a writer was an ability to make the unemphatic come alive. To read about his childhood is to breathe the brisk, comforting air of middle-class Toronto in the first years of the 20th Century.

[COLOURFUL THREAD]

"My immediate forbears were good, sturdy, God-fearing, and hard-working people. In the strong and sober fabric of their lives, however, there appeared occasionally a colourful thread of dissidence or eccentricity. My mother's family, the Bowles, came originally from Yorkshire but



went to Ireland with Cromwell. There they remained, Protestant, puritan, but, in time, completely Irish, until they came to Canada in the 1830's. The Rev. Dr. R. P. Bowles, the family chronicler, has written: '... They were no longer cold-blooded, calculating, rational folk. They had become warm-hearted, hospitable, sociable, highly emotionalized, a bit irresponsible, impetuous, hilarious and blessed with a high disregard of consequences ...'"

[BOTTOMS UP]

"I knew what drunkenness meant and how evil it was, something to be crushed. So I sang vigorously in Sunday School that 'we'll turn down our glasses (repeated three times) when filled with red wine,' only mildly wondering how you clean up the ensuing mess."

[FOREIGN PARTS]

"Quebec was virtually a foreign part which we read about in our school books in terms of Madeleine de Vercheres and the Battle of the Plains of Abraham. As for the rest of the world I thought about it ... largely in terms of the British Empire which was looking after the 'lesser breeds' and keeping the French and Germans under control."

"It was taken for granted that I would go to Victoria College in the University of Toronto, a Methodist foundation."

[JOINING THE RAF]

"By the autumn I had learned quite a lot about pulling strings in a good cause. So I decided to short-circuit all those channels. My father knew Sam Hughes; more than that he had played lacrosse and, I think, gone to Sunday School with him. General Hughes was now the Minister of Militia in Canada."

[PACKING PLANT]

"We were wondering what we should do in

*Mike, *The Memoirs of The Right Honourable Lester B. Pearson, PC, CC, OM, OBE, MA, LL.B., Volume I, 1897-1948; University of Toronto Press, \$12.50.*