

Books

# Mike Pearson tells his own happy story

A big cheerful grin, a jaunty bow tie and a repertoire of self-effacing quips were the outward manifestations made famous by the Canadian everyone came to know as 'Mike'. But behind the untiring good humour of Mr. Lester B. Pearson, there worked, just as tirelessly, a mind capable as any in his time of judging the realism of a diplomatic or political aspiration.

The qualities of happy, kindly wit and shrewd judgment of human affairs are both evident in the first volume of memoirs by the former Canadian Prime Minister, now out in London: *Memoirs 1897-1948, Through Diplomacy to Politics* (Victor Gollancz Ltd. £4.50).

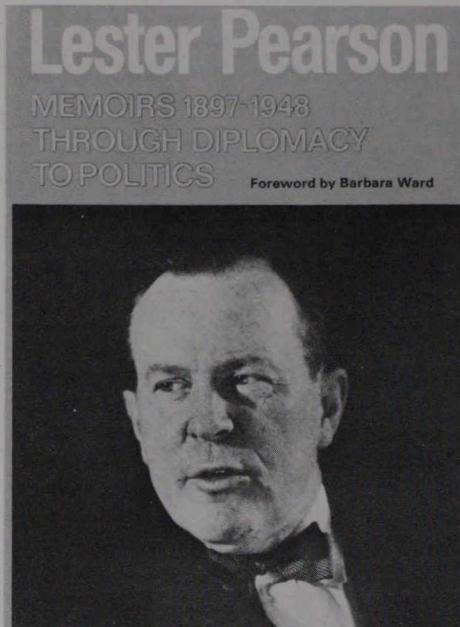
The self-effacement is evident from Pearson's preface onwards. "Whether I have done anything of excellence or properly resembling it is not for me to determine. I certainly have had many opportunities so to do. The years of my life have been filled with interest, variety, and excitement," he wrote.

In her foreword, Mr. Pearson's good friend, the British writer-economist Barbara Ward, puts his career in more precise perspective.

"Lester Pearson's life presents a paradox. He spent most of his career - as a diplomat, as Minister of External Affairs and finally as Prime Minister - in areas strewn with the land-mines of prejudice, bitterness, jealousy and misunderstanding.

"The chief task of Canadian diplomacy between 1920 and 1947 - the years during which Pearson rose from a junior officer to the permanent head of the Ministry - was to disengage the country from a 'colonial' relationship with Britain, define its role in the world in the midst of a total war and find a working partnership with its economically overwhelming and amiably indifferent American neighbour. To these complexities Pearson added, when he entered politics as Minister of External Affairs, a successful intervention in one of the great boneyards of diplomatic reputation - the Arab-Israeli dispute - for which he received the Nobel Peace Prize. Then for ten years he led the Liberal Party through the rigours of opposition, election and minority government - all activities calculated to bring out any latent strains of aggression, thwarted ambition or personal ungenerosity, either in the leader or the led.

"But here is the paradox. After a life of such total exposure, it is probably more true of Lester Pearson - of 'Mike' as he was universally known - than of any other public figure of our time that he had virtually no enemies and that he was



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sincerely loved and profoundly mourned by a planet full of friends."

## Enjoyed affection

C. P. Snow, another Pearson acquaintance, made a similar point in his review of the book for *The Financial Times*. "He earned a quite remarkable amount of affection anywhere, and even more remarkable, left few enemies to rejoice that he had gone."

The first volume of the Pearson autobiography appears here posthumously. He died last December, aged 75, shortly after completing a second volume, covering the years he was Minister of External Affairs. A third volume, devoted to his career as Prime Minister, was uncompleted at his death.

This first volume provides a variety of examples of the Canadian struggle to "disengage" itself from a colonial past and further the evolution of its own independence. Lord Snow's review refers to the high reputation the Canadian foreign service acquired during the years Pearson was one of its leading lights.

"They judged the situation of their country with much realism, and decided how much influence it could (and, quite as important, couldn't) bring to bear. They never overplayed their hand. . . . We couldn't define our real power position

in the post-1945 system with anything like the precision that the Canadians managed."

There are many examples of Pearson's realism in this volume. At one point he summarizes the Canadian evolution in which he was himself an important catalyst in these words:

"When we lament today the lack of a Canadian identity, of a strong sentiment of Canadian national pride, we should remember that we are not long removed from colonial subordination and that for us there has been only a relatively brief interval between the limitations of dependence on Great Britain and the fear of domination by the United States. Further, we achieved our political independence, our sovereignty, precisely at a time when, demonstrably, sovereignty and independence gave no assurance of security or of progress. We had to learn that the aspirations of independence often had to be reconciled with the necessities of interdependence. It was a difficult time to come of age, in foreign as well as in domestic affairs."

## Technique of compromise

Another reviewer was Sir Robert Jackson, husband of Barbara Ward and a Briton long associated with the United Nations, where he was personally acquainted with Pearson's work. It was out of these special Canadian difficulties arising from these historical and geographical factors, he wrote, and out of the Canadian struggle for independence that "there evolved that special Canadian technique of compromise, based on reason, respect, and common sense." Sir Robert, writing in *New Society*, added: "Small wonder then that to this day, the United Nations, as an organisation, and international officials, first turn, almost automatically, to Canada as the most likely source of the needed compromise."

Pearson is both critical and affectionate in the attitudes toward Britain revealed in his book.

He recalled lunching one day in the Travellers' Club, shortly before the collapse of France during World War II. His companion, British, chided him for being too pessimistic and told him to remember that the British always won the last battle. "I finally exploded at this attitude which seemed to me to be not calmness in the face of crisis so much as a silly smugness in the face of catastrophe. 'One day,' I replied, 'you people will lose a battle and only then realize it was the

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