

# Long on what, short on how

Book review by Greg Schmidt

Robert Bothwell and William Kilbourn have written a welcome addition to the library of Canadian political writing. Their biography of C.D. Howe is worthy of attention from the Canadian public for a number of reasons, the primary one being, C.D. Howe, for good or bad, shaped and created much of Canada as he saw fit.

However, while Howe provides a unique and exceptionally important figure for review, Bothwell and Kilbourn have not dealt with the man as well as they might have. *C.D. Howe: A Biography* has turned out to be, above all else, a chronology of the Liberal regimes under Mackenzie King and St. Laurent. The role of C.D. Howe in both men's governments was so

significant that he received ministerial billing from the public, as "Minister of Everything."

Perhaps the man proved to be as large a biographical task as was his role in Canadian government from 1935 to 1957. The authors spend 354 pages on reporting the events of Howe's career and it is only in the last seven that they offer critical evaluative analysis of his impact on Canada past and present.

Howe was an American born graduate of MIT when he moved to Canada in 1908, to accept a teaching position at Dalhousie. As an engineer knowledgeable of the problems of siting and construction of grain elevators, he became an advisor to the Board of Grain Commissioners in 1913. (This was the same year Howe applied to become a Canadian British subject.) The growth of his career was a veritable Horatio Alger replay. Howe developed an innovative and efficient grain unloader, built up his own company specializing in the construction and proliferation of prairie grain elevators, survived the '29 stock market crash, and eventually entered Canadian politics.

But, this book is not so much a rags to riches chronicle (he was not born poor) as it is an overgrown election pamphlet. If C.D. Howe were alive and if the Canadian voter had a general disposition to read, this would surely guarantee his re-election.

Howe was instrumental in the creation of the on again, off again love affair with the Crown Corpora-

tion. From the creation of the C.B.C., to Trans-Canada Airlines (now Air Canada), to the establishment in W.W. II of the Ministry of Munitions and Supply, Howe virtually ran Canada. A firm believer in the "you-scratch-my-back-I'll-scratch-yours" school of business, Howe was able to achieve, during the war and up until 1957, a major growth pattern for the Canadian economy.

Howe used and rewarded whomever he felt could get the job done, regardless of their political affiliation. A penchant for efficiency was more important to him than the political machinations that make politics a game. Even as a Liberal minister throughout and after the war, this nature allowed him to find value in obtaining aid from Conservative businessmen in the promotion of Canadian industry. If there is one thing Bothwell and Kilbourn adequately make clear it is that, Howe viewed his business acumen only in terms of serving the Canadian government in as business-like and efficient manner as possible. This was guided, in essence, by Howe's genuine concern for Canada's collective good.

This book on Howe is very anecdotal and as such leads the reader to chuckle, especially when recounting parliamentary debates. The most well known utterance reported to have come from the floor of the House of Commons except, perhaps, for "Fuddle Duddle", is Howe's reported, but incorrect, "What's a million?". This reply was in reference to a debate in the House on cost estimates of \$1,365 million. Dief the Chief is in large part responsible for perpetuating this phrase along with many of his own. (We all know what he thought polls were good for.)

This book on Howe is valuable for the material it presents which is the foundation of many of the present issues in Canada. Howe's involvement is clearly outlined and yet it does turn out to be more of a Liberal government biography than of the man, Clarence Decatur Howe. A particularly well-done chapter is that concerning the Trans-Canada Pipeline debate and its construction. The issues have remained, the lessons are particularly apt, and this chapter is one good reason to read this book.

The book re-proves that Canadian history, past and present, is both interesting and exciting. Bothwell and Kilbourn, if they falter as biographers, succeed as popular historians.

## Fun with words

Two U of A English professors will be part of Latitude 53's improvisational music and sound poetry concert this Wednesday at 8 p.m. in the Centennial Library Theatre.

Douglas Barbour and Stephen Scobie are the founders of an experimental poetry group known as Re: Sounding. "It's possible to theorise for hours about what we do," says Scobie, "but often an audience will get the most out of our work if they don't worry too much about the theoretical explanations."

"Basically, we're interested in vocal performance, in what can be done with the human voice working on and around the edges of language. But all the theoretical talk can easily obscure the element of playfulness in what we do: We're having a lot of fun and we hope our audiences do too."

"Insofar as we're dealing with language, we think it's poetry; and since we don't use 'musical' techniques like fixed rhythms or predetermined pitch we don't really think it's music, though it has close affinities to some kinds of experimental music. But ultimately you just have to hear it: it can't be written down, or adequately described."

Also appearing at Latitude 53 will be Otherwise, a creative music ensemble dedicated to the performance of improvisational music by group members and other contemporary composers, in a non-jazz contemporary style. Admission to the show will be \$5 or by subscription.

## Prairie pub poet

"He hears, in the beer-talk of our daily lives, the shape of our living." So says Robert Kroetsch about Saskatoon poet and publisher Glen Sorestad who will read this Thursday at 12:30 noon in HC AV-L3.

Sorestad is an active celebrant of regional claims in Canadian literature. Introducing *Prairie Pub Poems*, a work centered in prairie populist aesthetics as well as politics, Kroetsch says, "Sorestad hears the laments, the tall-tales, the ironies, the indignation, the resignation, the sentimentality — but he hears it all together." The same can be said of *Ancestral Dances*, Sorestad's latest book.

Sorestad's other books are *Wind Songs* and *Pear Seeds in my Mouth*.

Admission to this English Department Reading is free.

# Picking up where the others stop

Record review by Bruce Cookson

In 1964, the Dillardards shocked the staid bluegrass community by plugging in their instruments and going electric. Since then they went on to become one of the formative influences on the development of country-rock though they were never to gain the commercial success of other West Coast groups like Poco, The Flying Burrito Brothers or the Eagles.

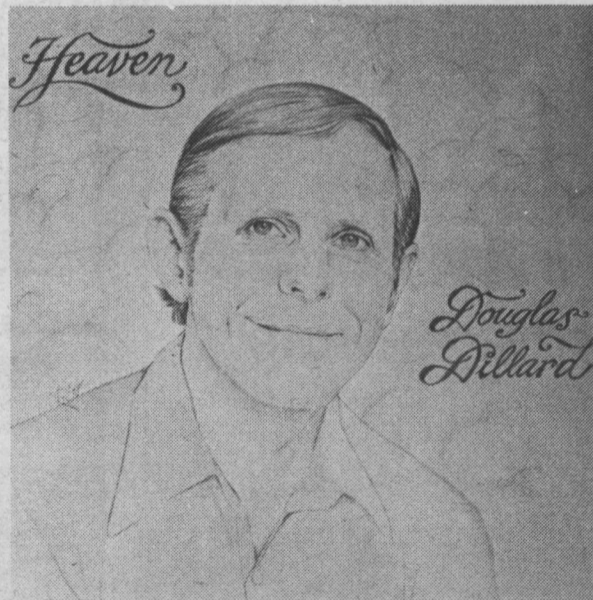
As Dillard fans will attest, the group is best heard live where their musical skills are combined with a superb, humorous ability to entertain. Nonetheless, they have released a number of fine albums over the years; *Wheatstraw Suite*, *Copperfields*, and *Pickin' and Fiddlin'* being some of them. Unfortunately, their latest record, *Decade Waltz*, does not live up to these standards. But fans can take heart, the new Doug Dillard record, *Heaven*, makes up for the disappointment.

*Decade Waltz* is so named because Herb Pedersen (banjo, vocal, guitars) has rejoined the Dillardards after a ten year absence. Pedersen originally left the group to form Country Gazette and for the last several years has worked as a session musician with people like Linda Ronstadt and Emmy-Lou Harris. Another change to the Dillard lineup has been the addition of Doug Bounsall (guitars, mandolin, fiddle, vocal) to replace Billy Rae Latham. Both are excellent musicians but there is only so much that can be done with weak material, the major problem with *Decade Waltz*.

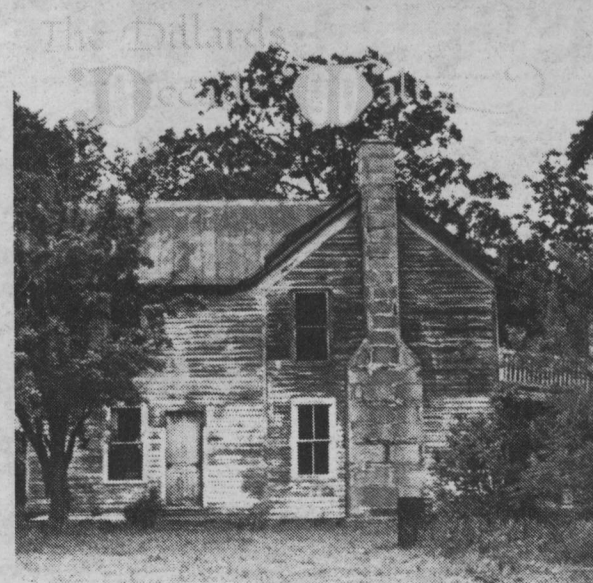
There are eleven songs on the album but only a few of these really make one want to listen to them again. Many offer nice moments but they never quite develop. The two Larry Murray penned songs, "Headed For the Country," and "Lights of Magdella," lead one to wonder if the Dillardards are going soft in the head. It's too bad because the songs that are worth listening to are quite good.

"Easy Ride" is one of those classic "learn what you had after it's gone" songs that mixes up love and the road. "It's an easy ride/from goodtimes to the blues," and you believe Rodney Dillard when he sings it in that high, aching voice of his. "Happy I'll Be" is a more traditional gospel number that allows the boys to break out their licks, something nice to hear on this restrained record.

The one wide open instrumental is "Gruelin' Banjos." On this song Bounsall and Pedersen show off their stuff while the rest of the band pumps away behind them.



And of course, there's a Beatles tune. It's always seemed kind of funny that it should be a bluegrass band



from Salem, Missouri that would provide some of the best Beatles covers. "We Can Work It Out" is no exception. There's no radical attempt to rearrange the tune but it still sounds fresh. The banjo doesn't hurt either.

Musically, there's nothing really wrong with *Decade Waltz*. The Dillardards play and arrange as well as anyone working their side of the street. However, if all, or even most, of the album's songs were as good as those mentioned, *Decade Waltz* would be a lot better. Perhaps what the Dillardards need now is a live album featuring their best material. Then they'd show what Dillard mania is all about.

If the Dillardards are floundering slightly, ex-Dillard Doug is riding high. *Heaven* is a refreshing album compared to much of the cynical and discoized schlock of the seventies. However be forewarned. If you don't like gospel and bluegrass, if you don't believe in the Lord, or if you don't like music enough that you don't mind songs about the Lord, then stay away from *Heaven* because that's what this album is exclusively about.

All of the Dillardards help out on this album as well as notable friends like Byron Berline, John Hartford and the tight rhythm section of Dave Jackson (drums) and John Raines (bass), both of whom have worked with Dillard before.

With song titles like "The Lord's Last Supper," "God's Record Book of Life," "St. Peter" and "Daniel Prayed," it's easy to guess what this record's all about. *Heaven* shows traditional as well as modern influences. "Daniel Prayed," for example, is a song by bluegrass great Ralph Stanley and is rendered in superb acappella harmony by Dillard and backup.

Most of the instrumentation is conventional to country and bluegrass: guitars, mandolin, fiddles, banjo and dobro. But as producer Rodney Dillard demonstrates, non-traditional instruments can work just as well. There's a thrilling soprano sax solo in "Cast Your Bread Upon the Water" that is marred only by its extreme brevity. On other numbers, the electric piano, that abysmally over-used instrument is surprisingly used to good effect.

If you like clean, spotless harmonies and fast, exciting bluegrass licks then get *Heaven*. The songs may be corny, they may be naive and unsophisticated, but there's a simplicity and honest courage in their presentation that makes them hard to ignore.