

Book Reviews

A prouder Canada

by Christopher Young

The Shaping of Peace: Canada and the Search for World Order, 1943-1957, Volume 2 by John W. Holmes. University of Toronto Press, 443 pages, \$37.50 (US).

Through the chance of a foreign correspondent's life, I read much of John Holmes's new book while on assignment in Syria and Lebanon. The fifth of the once-a-decade wars that have upheaved the Middle East since the birth of the state of Israel in 1948 was devastating southern Lebanon. The Israelis were blasting out the hiding holes of the PLO guerrillas and at the same time creating a new population of homeless refugees to follow the rivers of people who had flowed out of Palestine, Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan and Syria after the wars of 1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973.

It would not be the first thought that would occur to a foreign visitor to the scene, but it was an inevitable and striking point to consider for a Canadian reading about the search for peace in the 1940s and 1950s: Canada was not a player in this crisis. The Prime Minister had stated the Canadian position, quite forcefully and clearly. We were ready, as always, to help with humanitarian aid. But the idea that we might actually do something hardly seemed to be on the agenda. This is quite a change, perhaps not noticed by most Canadians outside the foreign service, and hardly remarked upon there. It is a non-story, because it is about something that is not happening. Yet it presents a striking contrast to the situation in the period with which Holmes is concerned in the second volume of *The Shaping of Peace*, his study of Canadian foreign policy in the period from 1943, when the planning of the postwar order began, to the fall of the Liberal government in 1957.

It is not just a change in the Middle East, or in the attitude to peace-keeping as a function, but in the whole approach we now take, as a people and through our government, toward the world of international politics and the great issues of our times.

"When the atomic bomb exploded at Hiroshima policy-planners in Ottawa, aware of it for the first time, started considering urgently what could be done to control it." Thus Holmes begins an early section of this book explaining how the United Nations Atomic Energy Commission came into being. They started considering *what could be done*. Today, when a great crisis breaks upon the world, Ottawa policy-planners certainly start urgently considering *what should be said*. One doubts that they spend a lot of

energy considering what can be done, because that is now considered, unless Canadian interests are very specifically affected, to be a job for other nations.

Many reasons have been given for this loss or abdication of the Canadian mission in the world. Our relative importance in the postwar world was temporary, due to our disproportionate and successful efforts in the war. The multiplication of sovereign nations in the post-colonial era reduced our significance as a middle power. The domination of world affairs by the rivalry of superpowers left us with an unacknowledged satellite status and a room for maneuver once estimated by Pierre Trudeau at five per cent. The first Trudeau government deliberately renounced the role it derisively described as that of "helpful fixer."

Canada turns inward

Whatever the causes of the change, whether mainly imposed by shifts in the world's power structure or self-inflicted by a people suddenly convinced that their own internal problems were more pressing than questions of war and peace, global destruction and mass starvation, it is a change that has diminished Canada's value to the world community. It can be argued not that we were distracted from our useful role in the world by pressing internal problems, but that because we allowed ourselves to become mired in our internal differences we had no energy left to play a useful part abroad. John Holmes is not a preacher, but he was one of the Pearsonian diplomats and fixers. He leaves no doubt of his own belief in the value of that role at the time, although he does not cast the argument forward to the present:

If self-righteousness can be held in check, there is a case to be made for the healing diplomacy of Canadians. The Commonwealth needed it, and Canadians responded. By 1957 — or even 1968 — there was no backing away from the role of "helpful fixer." To a large extent the role was thrust on Canadians, but it suited the new activist mood and External Affairs was not bashful about exploiting it.

In the Commonwealth Canada's aggressive "fixing" was a success. Prime Minister St. Laurent, External Affairs Minister Pearson and a strong team of officials helped to find a way around the problem of keeping republics within a monarchical system. They helped to launch the Colombo Plan, prototype of larger development schemes to come. They breathed life into an institution that had seemed to many of them, at the end of the war, only a euphemism for the vanishing Empire.

Lester Pearson, of course, led the diplomatic power plays that helped to resolve middle eastern crises in 1948