

### Literary award

Charles Ritchie, former Canadian diplomat and Special Adviser to the Privy Council before his recent retirement, was among six authors who recently won the Governor General's Literary Awards for 1974. *The Siren Years*, which is reviewed here, is a book of his personal recollections of the period from 1937 to 1945, when he served as a junior officer, mostly in London during the Second World War, has been described as the "undiplomatic diaries" of a diplomat and as "immensely readable".

Mr. Ritchie, states the dust-jacket of his book, "has written not so much of political events and diplomacy in themselves but of his personal response to these events and to people".

day. Among the most moving and sensitive passages in the book are those that deal with his long friendship with the novelist Elizabeth Bowen.

Throughout the diaries he manages with a word or a phrase to evoke a whole personality — for example, the pompous Canadian diplomat intrigued by the title "Your Excellency", who was heard to say to the chauffeur when leaving the Legation with his small son, "his little Excellency will sit in the front with you". Seeing beyond the world of the London clubs, he says on June 2, 1941, long before the event: "The common people of England deserve a few breaks and if it is socialism they want they should have it. I would trust them to make any form of government into something tolerant and tolerable."

### No jokes

There are passages in the book to make the reader laugh out loud (the passage for June 15, 1945, describing a weekend break from the labours of the San Francisco Conference is hilarious). Charles Ritchie does not tell jokes, but he sees life with such wry and direct vision, and reports it with such a talent of description and characterization, that even an ordinary event takes on incisiveness and high humour. The immediate pre-war years brought us together, when, for me (a student on a Massey Fellowship), the Canada House of Vincent Massey, Lester Person, Georges Vanier and Charles Ritchie had a special meaning — a meaning it had also for many others of my generation of Canadians. On another occasion, in the spring of 1943, Ritchie and I were to return from London to Canada, and the only feasible way seemed to be by

military aircraft. We were told by the authorities that the flight in question was wholly taken up by a shipment of parts for *Mosquito* planes. Norman Robertson's intervention on our behalf solved the problem, his main observation being that, so far as he was concerned, Ritchie and and this writer "were indistinguishable from *Mosquito* parts". (We made it to Ireland and eventually home, but with unforgettable stops *en route* in the whiskey and linen shops of Foynes and Limerick.) His many friends have never ceased to enjoy and admire Ritchie, and *The Siren Years* helps to explain why. During the period of these diaries, Ritchie was in his early thirties. As he writes in the introduction, "wartime London was a forcing-ground for love and friendship, for experiments and amusements snatched under the pressure". In the most personal aspects, the diary faithfully records frailties and foibles, beauty and boredom, in his own life as in that of others. There are confessional moments, as in the entry for November 2, 1941: "I suppose I ought to cultivate the society of solid civil servants instead of rococo Roumanian princesses and baroque dilettantes." But, at the level of his professional duties, during the "siren years" and the long period of his later service, he became part of what he admired in describing his predecessors in the Department of External Affairs in the mid-Thirties — "a handful of unusually gifted men who shared the belief that Canada had its own role to play in the world and a conception of what that role should be". These were men "who worked together without feeling for respective rank, without pomposity, with humour, despising pretence, intolerant of silliness and scathing in their contempt for self-advertisement".

A recent issue of *The New Yorker* carried a cartoon showing an affluent elderly gentleman sitting in his ornate living-room in front of a television set on which Walter Cronkite was ending one of his nightly newscasts with his sign-off "And that's the way it is". The affluent elderly gentleman is shaking his finger irately at the set and saying "No — that's NOT the way it is, Walter!" Some who saw the war years from a different perspective may echo this. *The Siren Years* is the record of how Charles Ritchie sensed the period and of how it was for him. We must all be grateful that he did not abandon the diary addiction.

Ritchie, Charles. *The siren years: a Canadian diplomat abroad, 1937-1945*. Toronto, Macmillan of Canada, 1974. 216 pp.

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