

# Book Reviews

## More parallax than paradox

by Allan J. MacEachen

*The 49th Paradox: Canada in North America* by Richard Gwyn. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985, 362 pages, \$22.95.

Richard Gwyn is a political journalist who has a reputation for pithy political commentaries. He possesses an observant eye and writes well. In his previous efforts at longer literary output — *The Shape of Scandal*, *Smallwood*, *The Northern Magus* — he wrote about subjects of which he formed firsthand impressions from his pew in the press gallery.

*The 49th Paradox* is, as Gwyn himself admits, a bit of a departure from his previous efforts. It is the product of six months "full time work" (p. 349) between January and July 1985. Its motivation sprang from a desire "to understand my own country better" and "a pragmatic calculation that Canada-USA relations would be a hot subject in 1985" (p. 10). This, perhaps, is the cause of the paradox within *The 49th Paradox*, for while always readable, it is not always reliable.

Canadians, Mr. Gwyn tells us, are different from Americans. This profound conclusion is a consequence of a political culture "utterly unlike" that of the United States — a claim that will provide fleeting reassurance to those seeking clues as to the content of Canadianism. Ours, says Mr. Gwyn, is a "culture of liberalism" (p. 173) which must not, however, be confused with the formal ideologies, such as they are, of Canada's alternate governing parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives. This culture has produced a value system based on "decency institutionalized" which has found expression in many forms: medicare, equalization, bilingualism and multiculturalism, the Charter of Rights are some examples.

### **Liberals, liberals and "liberals"**

Recognizing the difficulties of identifying the moment of transition to this "liberal society" the persevering Mr. Gwyn embarks on a personal crusade and finds his holy grail in two places: "church basements and inside church and chapel pulpits" and Gad Horowitz's description of "Red Toryism." These paradoxical themes fused as one, and Mr. Diefenbaker's election victory of 1957 and the Quiet Revolution of 1960 transformed Canada "from a conservative society to a liberal one" (p. 173).

I confess that my astonishment at this revelation was exceeded only by Mr. Gwyn's description of those who personify this transmutation: J.S. Woodsworth, Stanley Knowles, Bill Blaikie, Bob Ogle, the MacDonalds (Flora and David), David Crombie, O.D. Skelton, Norman Robertson, W.A. MacIntosh, Eugene Forsey and Stephen Lewis — the latter, perhaps because he has confessed, "I like Tories" (p. 170). Even R.B. Bennett finds admission to this unlikely pantheon. This prevailing political culture does not feature a prominent member, nor indeed an obscure one, of the Liberal party (although Pearson would seem to have qualified when he was an "Ottawa mandarin"), nor any Quebecker (except Brian Mulroney "at the 1976 leadership"). One is left wondering how it came about that almost all the manifestations of legislated or "institutionalized liberalism" were established by politicians and a party whom Gwyn excludes from the contemporary political culture and during an epoch when his prevalent culture's messengers and personifications sat in opposition.

### **Nationalism**

Nationalism occupies much space in this book. Gwyn readily admits in the Foreword that it would have been "impossible" to be executive assistant (1968-1970) to Eric Kierans, the "golden oldie of nationalists," and "pretty hard" to write political columns for the *Toronto Star* and not be a nationalist. This book is offered as a possible new nationalist agenda. Unfortunately, no effort is made to tie the political culture of liberalism to the substance of nationalism and nation-building. Rather they are treated as separate developments on separate tracks.

Until the advent of Walter Gordon, Mr. Gwyn is content to describe the history of nationalism or nation-building through the contending views and policies of Sir John A. Macdonald's National Policy, Sir Wilfrid Laurier's Reciprocity and the stillborn trade discussions of the late 1940s. That description forcibly reminds us that attitudes and prejudices of the past still live on in Canada and strongly influence the current debate in Canada on a bilateral trade agreement with the United States. To his credit Mr. Gwyn attempts to situate the debate in the reality of Canada's contemporary circumstances and not in the fears and prejudices of the past.