

At one time his Toronto office was the point of convergence for the League for Social Reconstruction (LSR), the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) of Ontario, *Canadian Forum* magazine, and the socialist newspaper *The New Commonwealth*.

As a biography-substitute, *Passion and Conviction* offers an informative and novel view of the early days of the Ontario CCF, its leadership problems, and the issues that were under discussion in the mid-1930s. Spry was one of the CCF's first candidates, running (and losing) in a 1934 by-election. Unfortunately, none of his letters or notes deals with this event or the 1935 general election, and therefore this important phase in Spry's life and in Canadian political history is given short shrift. Further research would certainly show that there is much more to the story. But Potvin does provide a telling glimpse into the circle of friends who founded the LSR and CCF out of a sense of disappointment when the "old idea of a left-wing Liberal party, so freely promised in private conversations," failed to take shape. Her book is also the fullest and most colourful account to date of the CRL's thrifty and effective lobbying effort.

Potvin came to write this book through her research on Canadian broadcast policy as well as a brief friendship she and Spry enjoyed late in his life. Shortly after his death in 1983, Irene Biss Spry asked Potvin to write her husband's biography. But interviews with friends and colleagues and the nature of Spry's personal papers convinced Potvin "that the biographical form was not the best to tell Graham's story." She therefore decided to craft it in the subject's own words. "My job," she writes, "was simply to select the material, put some order into it, and introduce it with background information here and there." But this approach does not always suffice. In addition to letters, Spry wrote diaries, unfinished memoirs, articles, speeches, and reports, all of which would further elucidate the story of his life. Potvin intermittently draws on these additional sources, but her reliance on the correspondence is still too great. She herself acknowledges certain "glaring omissions" inherent in collections of letters. For example, absent from this "biography" is the interchange between family and friends as well as others who, because of their physical nearness, never exchanged letters with Spry. At its

worst, this failing misrepresents much of his most important work, namely the behind-the-scenes lobbying he must have engaged in as part of his CRL activities. As well, the close relationship with his friend and colleague Alan Plaunt appears here merely as sporadic promissory notes between debtor and creditor. Quite simply the two men dined together nearly everyday during their radio campaign and therefore had little cause to describe their activities in written form.

Throughout the book, Potvin attempts to stress Spry's contentedness with his life and the absence of bitterness and remorse. However, a tone of sadness pervades. She notes the tragedy in the fact that what Spry wanted most he never got: a chance to serve Canada in Canada. But clearly he did serve Canada in Canada. His work with the CRL shaped Canadian broadcasting; several generations have not entirely undone what Spry and Plaunt accomplished in that busy year and a half. He was also an important part of the generation that brought Canadian socialism to bud. Knowing what we know about Spry's character, it is likely that he held it all together through the difficult early years. However, what is most clear from *Passion and Conviction* is that Spry represents a vanished type: a Canadian committed to public service, willing to work exceedingly hard for a better nation and not simply for personal advancement and profit. This collection is a good start but a thorough and critical biography of Graham Spry still awaits.

**David Kimmel**  
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Donald Harman Akenson, *God's Peoples: Covenant and Land in South Africa, Israel, and Ulster* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press 1992).

Donald Akenson's latest book, *God's Peoples*, is timely, ambitious, and tough to review. The author, who teaches history at Queen's University, admits as much at the outset:

As even a glance at the table of contents makes clear, this book is a study in analogical history. Either the reader will be convinced that the ancient Hebrews had a distinct and robust way of constructing their

world and that this conceptual apparatus significantly influenced at least three distinct modern cultures, or the book fails. (6)

The ancient Hebrews' covenant with their God, Akenson argues, has been an enduring conceptual grid without which the histories (and futures) of modern Ulster, Israel, and South Africa make little sense.

Ranging widely, the book covers three historiographical traditions, biblical studies, and numerous theoretical issues related to language, historical materialism and culture. This review will take Akenson's hermeneutical position at face value. Rather than bogging down with theory and historiography, it will consider how his analysis of ancient Hebrew and modern covenantal cultures helps to make sense of various social, political, and institutional developments in the societies under study.

In the first chapter, Akenson develops the conceptual grid of "covenant," an interconnected set of ideas and instincts centred on an anthropomorphic God, his Chosen People, and Law. Crucial to this grid are "if-then" relationships — once the people accept a contract with their God, they are bound by it. If they remain faithful, God will bless them; if they turn away, God will curse and reject them. Both victory and defeat can thus reinforce the covenantal ideal. Furthermore, everything is at stake within this mindset. From politics to social values, everything has transcendent implications. The sacred encompasses the secular. Sharp definitions of enemies (us-them) become necessary. Group purity must be maintained. Mythologies of Exodus and freedom become central. And, most importantly for Akenson, land becomes a holy trust to be protected, a Promised Land. He concludes, "To keep the deal that is the covenant, a society must be uncompromising, adamant, self-contained." (42)

Akenson thus stresses that the Hebrew or "Old Testament" covenant is a hard ideology, one softened by theology in most Christian traditions but left unusually intact among Ulster Protestants and Afrikaner Calvinists. As a heuristic device, his stark portrayal of the covenant works. But from a theological perspective, it loses some of the Hebrew scriptures' subtlety, particularly the spiritualism of the Psalms, the social criticism of the proph-

ets, the historical books' emphasis on God's patient dealings with the ancient Hebrews, and commands to deal justly with strangers in the land. The same point is clear with his description of the religious history of modern covenantal societies. Akenson's sources and examples largely seem to be expressions of public mythology, social contracts, and political pronouncements. Evidence drawn from private worship, Sunday sermons, and devotional practices would "soften" his picture of the covenant.

Two issues stand out in my reading of this chapter: First, the Hebrew covenant and its modern forms are strong, rough-edged stuff, as Akenson argues. Second, Akenson downplays persistent counter-themes within each tradition that potentially undercut the self-contained, uncompromising character of covenantal ideology. He sacrifices a nuanced, multi-dimensional definition of "covenant" to gain analytic clarity and isolate its socio-political implications. In the process, he may have missed some basic internal sources of change.

Subsequent chapters apply the covenantal grid to modern Israel, Ulster, and South Africa and highlight strikingly similar patterns of development. The importance of language, abrasive foreign policies, efforts to define and maintain racial purity, mythologies of Exodus (freedom gained, victories won, defeats endured), and the development of the state to institutionalize the covenant have characterized each society. Akenson acknowledges the importance of capitalism and the state, but argues that the covenant has given unique coherence and power to these cultures and has been more deeply rooted than nationalism.

Akenson also sketches the decline of covenantal culture in Ulster and South Africa — from material, institutional, and cultural causes. The influence of liberal political cultures in both, economic sanctions in South Africa (capitalism corrodes even the covenant), and the presence of the British state in Ulster have thwarted the influence of covenantal ideologies in the last two decades. In Israel, the covenant remains stronger, despite endemic problems with Palestinians and criticism from the world community.

An in-depth critique of this wide-ranging book would be otiose at best in a relatively short review. Instead I will simply raise the

question that most often came to mind while reading it. Akenson's description of modern covenantal cultures and their breakdown could be read as typical of how modernity (and later post-modernity?) transforms and erodes premodern ethno-religious identities. Covenantal cultures may be more coherent and self-contained than common forms of nationalism, but is this a difference of degree or kind? Akenson does not sufficiently address the theoretical issues scholars of nationalism have been posing. Nor does he deal with the more inchoate use of covenantal language common in some nationalist traditions (the United States quickly springs to mind).

The book's payoff comes in the conclusion, where Akenson reiterates that the ancient Hebrew covenant forms "the single most powerful cultural construct yet built by humankind." (349) He suggests that policy makers need to take these societies seriously, and not simply denounce them as archaic, irrational, or morally benighted. Covenantal cultures can be dealt with, but most effectively from within an understanding of their mindset and an ability to speak their codes. They require time to redefine themselves and make new ideas their own, and will compromise only on their terms. Akenson makes an evenhanded (but probably controversial) point in a world lately preoccupied with nationalist and ethnic conflict.

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Roger Biles, *A New Deal for the American People* (de Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press 1991).

Roger Biles' *A New Deal for the American People* attempts to evaluate the impact of the New Deal on the lives of Americans both in the immediate Depression Years, but also its legacy some fifty years later. Biles claims to re-interpret the New Deal in light of recent scholarship of this crucial historical period. Yet, Biles' re-interpretation is limited by his asking the basic question: Was the New Deal a "radical" break with the past, or a "conservative" achievement?

Biles addresses this question by reviewing the historiography of the New Deal period. In this sense, the book introduces the unin-

formed to the standard historiography of the New Deal. Biles informs the reader about the flurry of governmental programs dealing with banking and finance, labor, industry, agriculture, and relief and social welfare. If there is anything new in this book it is the attention Biles pays to Blacks and women, two groups often ignored by the mainstream of New Deal literature. But even here, like the more familiar topics of labor, banking, industry, and agriculture, Biles offers little in the way of an analysis, explanation, or interpretation. Rather, he describes the various programs from a very top-down frame of reference.

Biles concludes that the New Deal was not a "revolution." Many of the programs were inherited from the past and the New Deal, taken as a whole, was not very innovative. And worse yet, the New Deal program "failed" to restore economic prosperity. But, Biles informs the reader, the New Deal did make some lasting changes. For example, the expanded role of the federal government in economic matters of regulating banking and finance, changes in relationships between workers and employers, government protection of the rights of workers to join unions of their own choosing, the growth in importance of the executive branch of the federal government, the expansion of the Democratic Party and changes in urban politics, and the creation of a limited welfare state are some of the changes that the New Deal stimulated in American life in the past 50 years.

Biles argues that the fact that the New Deal conserved more than it changed is understandable, since the American "people have consistently chosen freedom over equality." Why this is the case, is left unanswered. In fact, the reader is left with little analysis of the complex relationships, political and economic, that shaped the New Deal program. But for Biles to offer an explanation, some analysis of literature beyond the standard historiography would have had to be included. Surprisingly, little is mentioned about the Left and its impact on various programs. Extra-parliamentary struggles are non-existent. The role of the Communist Party in the industrial union movement is virtually ignored and the question of political repression is never asked, never mind answered.

Biles' book is a concise standard account of the New Deal program. By ignoring a