

# REVIEWS

Martin Robin, *Shades of Right: Nativist and Fascist Politics in Canada, 1920-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1992).

Martin Robins' *Shades of Right* is a timely book. His excursion through two decades of tumultuous social change in Canada sheds considerable light on the activities and personality of the extreme political right — the Ku Klux Klan, Adrien Arcand and the motley collection of his counterparts scattered throughout English-speaking Canada, and the attempts of German and Italian consular officials to whip up support for Hitler and Mussolini among their respective immigrant communities in Canada. All of these groups preached variations on a theme of hatred, taking advantage of the sense of uncertainty and dislocation that permeated these decades and the deep-seated racism that had already shaped Canadian society.

In this work Martin Robin has made two important contributions to understanding this period of our past. First, he has reconstructed the map of hatred. By ferreting out the broad spectrum of individuals and groups who belonged to some part of the extreme right, he has shown the pervasiveness of ideas of hatred and activities that flowed from them in all parts of Canada. While the focus of hatred shifted from province to province, region to region, French Canadians, Catholics, Jews, First Nations peoples, Blacks, Orientals and non-British immigrants were always on the list of targets. Clearly, much of the hatred was driven by notions of a Canada that was British, English-speaking, Protestant and white, a vision that had impinged increasingly on Canadian politics from the time of Confederation. While the numbers of Canadians who joined these groups remained small, disturbingly large numbers tolerated and accepted their hateful rhetoric. Secondly, Robin has managed to open for debate the extent to which groups on the extreme right, advocating viru-

lent forms of hatred, cultivated links to established, mainstream political parties. For instance, in Saskatchewan, the Ku Klux Klan clearly became an opportune vehicle for the provincial Conservatives in their bid to oust the Gardiner Liberals from power in 1929. At the federal level, R.B. Bennett appeared willing to countenance extremist invective — from the KKK or Adrien Arcand — if in pandering to popular prejudices Conservative votes were the result. While Robin has raised this important issue of Canadian political history, clearly there is much more to uncover. What is evident is the extent to which mainstream parties, particularly the Conservatives, were prepared to cultivate extremist groups for their own purposes: a dangerous political game with consequences which remain to be understood fully.

Despite the fascinating picture that *Shades of Right* paints of extremist political attitudes and groups in Canada, many readers will find it disappointing and irritating in several ways.

Those looking for an elucidation of the historical context from which these various manifestations of hatred were nourished will find little of it in this book: Robin explains the who, when, where and what but far too little of the *why*. Without a substantial discussion of how it came to be that so many Canadians, in such diverse parts of the country, were susceptible to messages of naked hatred, it will be too easy for too many to dismiss Robin's account as simply the story of another time in a different Canada. In reality, Robin's is a cautionary tale of where Canada seems to be heading again. It is only in understanding *why* hatred was so potent between 1920 and 1940 that Canadians have any hope of avoiding a repetition. Popular prejudices, once again, are growing in intensity throughout Canada; as Robin shows it does not take much political manipulating to twist them into dangerous activities. This book misses an important opportunity to instruct.

Robin's penchant for snappy slang (e.g. "big Bund cheese," 245) is a constant irrita-

tion throughout the book. When added to pointless repetition of phrases and sentences, sentences that sometimes are meaningless and errors of simple fact (e.g. *God Save the Queen* in 1936, 223) the book takes on a self-indulgent quality that detracts from its virtues. A much stronger and consistent editorial hand would have made a great difference. The absence of a bibliography of the works cited is a disservice to those who would profit from Robin's extensive research. Finally, this book, like so many others, makes the case for returning to the old practice of placing footnotes at the bottom of the page. Robin's notes are a treasurehouse of information: how many readers will not bother to flip back and forth to experience their richness?

These criticisms aside, this is an important book that deserves to be read and discussed widely. Today's politicians need to better understand the folly of dabbling opportunistically in the muck of prejudices and hatred. All Canadians need to remember how easy it is to succumb to the lure of the simple answers to complex problems that hatred always offers. This is a book for our own times.

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Howard Leeson, *Grant Notley: The Social Conscience of Alberta*. (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press 1992).

No political movement can succeed without leadership. The question is what kind of leadership is needed as determined by circumstances and the choice of political terrain? For social democrats this has been answered by developing credible managers who can build an electoral class base within the parliamentary system.

Howard Leeson's biography of Grant Notley, leader of the Alberta New Democratic Party for much of the 1970s and 1980s, is a classic example of this dual process: the development of a credible program of state capitalist development in a mixed economy and the Canadian social democratic debate over

who should provide the party's electoral base. Should it be a progressive coalition of farmers, small business and labour? Or one more closely aligned with the trade union movement?

Leeson pursues these two themes in a concise fashion by reviewing Notley's rural upbringing near Olds, Alberta, his role in founding the University of Alberta CCF club in the late 1950s, his selection as Provincial Secretary of the new NDP in 1962, becoming Party Leader in 1968, election as the party's sole MLA in 1971 for the Peace River District (Spirit Fairview), and subsequent re-election until his death in an airplane crash in the fall of 1984.

As Leeson sympathetically shows, Grant Notley personified the struggle to shift the party's leadership away from the old doctrinaire populists (who split briefly from the new NDP in 1961 to form the Woodsworth-Irvine Fellowship) and from the new trade union bureaucrats under Neil Reimer's leadership in the 1960s. In the course of this struggle, as Leeson admits, electoral popularity, not questions of principle, informed much of Notley's behaviour.

Not until he was elected in the 1970s did Notley begin to define a policy platform. The outlines of Notley's social democracy in fact can be briefly reduced to the positive role the state can play in regulating a mixed economy as focused on such Alberta issues as shaping the oil boom in the long term interests of provincial development. Though, as Leeson proudly asserts, Notley could act the role of the Canadian statesman when he opposed the Lougheed government's oil strike against the National Energy Program.

In reality, while Notley illustrates the emergence of a Parliamentary state capitalist politics, the real focus of Leeson's biography is on the nature of electoral support for Albertan social democracy. Here Grant Notley, as Leeson admits, was a voice from the past, someone who may have revived the party's fortunes but who could not embody the future.

Notley, perhaps because of his rural middle-class past, shied away from urban, trade union social democracy. In part, it was because he disagreed with Reimer's confronta-