

Donald C. MacDonald, *The Happy Warrior: Political Memoirs* (Toronto: Dundurn, 1998).

Donald C. MacDonald led the CCF and then the New Democrats in Ontario from November 1953 to October 1970. He embodied the party for much of that period, particularly in the late fifties and early sixties when few party members were able to win seats. His memoirs offer an opportunity to observe the priorities of the mainstream of social democracy during the Cold War in Canada's leading industrial province. Originally written in 1988, the "updated and expanded" edition of 1998 also offers a cautious but nonetheless clear critique of the Rae government from 1990 to 1995, which blasted the hopes of many social democrats, and raised the defensive abilities of others to new levels.

MacDonald's belief in social justice and in civil liberties shines through both his chronological and thematic summaries of his lengthy period as a member of the Ontario legislative assembly (he remained a member of the legislature until 1982 when he resigned to let Rae, the new leader of the party and former federal MP, have a safe seat to contest in a bid to enter the legislature). But what also shines through is the absence of an overall perspective on how socialism was to be implemented in Ontario. Or was it to be? One is never sure here whether the perspective of MacDonald and his caucus was more than that of "liberals in a hurry" (or even Liberals in a hurry, if one concedes MacDonald's partisan claims that the Ontario Liberals, at least before David Peterson, were not particularly liberal). The economy figures weakly in this account. While the CCF and then the NDP, according to MacDonald were committed to an advanced welfare state and a concomitant massive redistribution of wealth in the province, they seem to have had no notion that the capitalists might have a thing or two to say about their plans. Of course, the Rae government learned quickly that the ruling class had pretty clear ideas about what it would stand for from a "people's government," and what it would respond to with capital strikes, and threats of capital strikes. It capitulated to the business lobbies because it had no contingency plans for what to do if the ruling class refused to accept the will of the electorate. One has a sneaking suspicion, on the basis of this memoir, that a Donald MacDonald-led government would have been no more prepared than the Rae government to deal with a concerted battle on the part of the vested interests. R. H. Tawney, commenting on the disastrous performance of the Ramsay MacDonald Labour government in Britain from 1929 to 1931, noted that the statesmanlike Labour politicians seemed to think capitalism was an onion that they would rip up leaf by leaf, when in fact it was a tiger and had no intention of being declawed claw by claw. Similarly, the Ontario NDP, largely cloistered in a world bounded by the legislative assembly, seemed to have little notion of what reaction would face an elected government determined to make major

changes in the way society operated.

Within the legislature, MacDonald, as he indirectly admits, got trapped into focussing on issues that often had little resonance with the working people and farmers whom he had entered politics to defend. "It was certainly never my intention, or expectation, that my legislative activity would be dominated by consideration of scandals." Although standards of public morality, conflicts between private interests and public responsibilities, breaches of parliamentary procedure and the use (or abuse) of public institutions for partisan public purposes, are noteworthy "they are actually part of the overall process and don't deal directly with the basic objective of meeting people's needs. However the situation left me with no alternative but to become involved" (74). There was however little political payoff in this high-minded detour from the job of "meeting people's needs." MacDonald won few new supporters for his party as he muckraked against the government, and, as he admits, even his campaign against organized crime in Ontario met with little sympathy "Incredible as it may seem, the incriminating elements of the Roach Report didn't register with the public," writes MacDonald of the report on the extent of Mafia-type activities in Ontario. Even more incredible, and perhaps sad, is that MacDonald and his colleagues appeared unable to determine a way to stick to their "basic objective" while in the legislature, rather than seeming to be the Liberals' junior partner in smearing the government. Not that the government did not deserve to be smeared, but a focus on the dishonesty and duplicity of particular ministers was hardly likely to play any role in convincing Ontarions of the need for a socialist economy (if indeed the Ontario NDP stood for such a thing).

While critical of the Rae government for its climbdown on public auto insurance and for its so-called social contract with its employees that gutted their legitimate collective bargaining rights and contracts, MacDonald stresses his support for a pragmatic socialism for Ontario, though he does not define it. He criticizes his immediate successor as leader, Stephen Lewis, for appearing to be too frightening to the Ontario electorate in the 1971 provincial election — though what Lewis promised that was so frightening is never mentioned — and compliments him for appearing more moderate in the 1975 election that restored the democratic Left to Official Opposition status for the first time since the 1948 election. "Socialism is not only the fulfillment of democracy," opines MacDonald, "but, as such, it dovetails with Ontario's non-ideological predisposition to moderate, balanced pragmatism." (343) "The implementation of socialist policies has resulted in continuous democratization — the extension of basic rights and privileges to many members of society who had hitherto been denied them," (345) he further argues.

In one sense, of course, MacDonald is correct. Ontario and the rest of Canada are not radical places with a furious proletariat calling for revolution. But, on the other, the naiveté that informs an analysis that conflates the implementation of social welfare programs with "the implementation of

178 Left History 6.2

socialist policies” has to be contested. Democratization has not been “continuous;” it has had to contend with the upswings and downturns of the economic cycle, and, in the last two decades, with a robust neo-liberalism that has successfully eroded many of the workers’ gains on both the social-welfare and civil-liberties fronts. The world would be better off if every one were as generous and compassionate as Donald MacDonald, and Ontarions owe him much for having fought the good fight in the legislature for so long. But somehow as one reads his memoirs, it is hard not to believe that this noble representative of post-war social democracy over-estimated strongly the positive adjustments for the masses that could be made without root-and-branch structural changes.

Alvin Finkel  
Athabaska University