

**Robert Teigrob, *Four Days in Hitler's Germany: Mackenzie King's Mission to Avert a Second World War.* Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2019, 275 pp. ISBN 178-1-4875-0550-9**

"It is interesting," journalist Grant Dexter of the *Winnipeg Free Press* wrote of his conversation with Senator Norman Lambert, "to hear him explain that he simply can't stand the worm at close quarters—bad breath, a fetid, unhealthy, sinister atmosphere like being close to some filthy object. But get off a piece and he looks better and better."

Lambert ran the National Liberal Federation and was the key fundraiser for Mackenzie King and, as this comment offered in April 1941, made clear he was no devotee of the Prime Minister. But Lambert recognized King's worth: "get off a piece and he looks better and better." No one will accuse Robert Teigrob of believing that King will ever look better and better no matter how far off he might stand.

Mackenzie King was a hugely successful political leader, but he was never greatly loved by Canadians. They voted for him in substantial part because, however much they might have disliked him, he seemed better than his Tory opponents. And because he governed for so long, King's impact on the nation was huge—advancing Canadian independence in a British Commonwealth, creating a huge war effort, and laying the foundations of the welfare state. This record has twice led Canadian historians to rank King as the best of their prime ministers. Few of the historians admired King as a man, but his record inevitably garnered their praise.

Professor Teigrob's book, at once ridiculing King and being outraged by him, is a gloves off attempt to knock Mackenzie King off his perch at the top of the historians' list. By focussing on King's four-day visit to Berlin in June 1937, he develops a lengthy catalogue of King's flaws, pettiness, naivete, and foolishness. "Weird Willie," as another historian labelled him, venerated his mother and frequented mediums who gave him messages from her and the more famous deceased. He was obsessed with his dogs. He found meaning in cloud formations, in seeing the hands of the clock together, and in the way shaving cream took shape in his mug. All this has been well known ever since King's extraordinary diaries were opened to researchers over the last half century, but Teigrob believes it necessary to paint this portrait yet again to set the stage for King's Berlin visit.

And certainly, King seemed a gullible, credulous naif in Berlin. He admired the clean streets, the organized drive of the Nazi regime, the fit young men and women. He was impressed by what leading Nazis told him of the regime's peaceful aims and desire to be on good terms with Britain. He immediately liked Hermann Goering as a man and even invited him to come to Canada to hunt big game. There was nothing in Berlin to

which he took exception, and certainly not the regime's treatment of the Jews.

Mackenzie King was no raving anti-Semite. In Canada antisemitism was long widespread in both French and English Canada, and King, a product of the Victorian era and the belief that the British race, the white Christian race, was superior to all, had been shaped by his upbringing. There are many instances in the diary, carefully noted by Teigrob, where his prejudice became clear, and in Berlin when he met Baron von Neurath, the Foreign Minister, King listened quietly as he was told of Hitler's intention to reduce the overweening influence of the Jews. Later, when efforts were made to allow German Jews fleeing the Nazis to enter Canada, the Liberal government shut the doors. King himself was sympathetic, but the opposition from his Quebec ministers and M.P.s was very strong, and King needed Quebec's support if he was to bring a more or less united nation into the coming war—and to win elections. Moreover, the mass unemployment of the Depression made immigration of any kind a difficult question for the government. Still, there can be no doubt that King ought to have done better.

The main purpose of the visit, of course, was to meet the Führer, Adolf Hitler, and the conversation took place at some length on June 29. Most of the discussion was cordial chitchat, but King was impressed by Hitler's claims of peaceful intentions now that he had gutted the terms of the Treaty of Versailles that had punished Germany for its many sins during the Great War. For his part, King also proclaimed his interests in peace and, fresh from the Imperial Conference in London that had followed the coronation of George VI, he took pains to assure Hitler that British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, in office for a month, wanted only good relations with Germany. Hitler, King convinced himself, was a man of peace.

King, however, did have a message for Hitler. As he wrote in his diary, "I told him that . . . if peace were threatened by an aggressive act of any kind on the part of any country, there was little doubt that all parts [of the Commonwealth] would resent it. We valued our freedom above everything else, and anything which would destroy the security of that freedom by destroying any part of the Empire would be certain to cause all carefully to view the whole situation in their own interest and in the interests of the whole." In King's convoluted style of speech that was a warning that the nations of the Commonwealth, and certainly Canada, would be willing to fight if Hitler threatened Britain and Europe. Hitler "said he could understand how that would be."

Certainly, as Professor Teigrob makes clear, in June 1937 Mackenzie King believed that he had a mission to try to prevent another war. Canada was no player in global diplomacy then (or now) but the Great War had killed 66,000 Canadians and bitterly divided the nation. Anything that could be done to avoid another great conflict should be done and, if he could help to push Hitler in the direction of peace, that

was worth doing. A credulous Prime Minister persuaded himself that he had done so. But as Hitler continued his expansionist and aggressive policies King, while never forgetting his belief that he found Hitler to be a man of peace, prepared Canada for war. At the time of Munich, he pushed a Cabinet that had its reluctant ministers toward the position that Canada must stand at Britain's side. But when Chamberlain and French Premier Daladier gave away the Czech Sudetenland in the culminating moment of appeasement, King—like almost all Canadians and most of the world—was overjoyed. Peace had been preserved—if only for a year. After Hitler invaded Poland in September 1939, King would bring Canada into the war, and the nation's war effort he directed was huge and effectively run.

Unfortunately, Professor Teigrob appears almost completely unaware of the vast literature on his subject. The book he relies on most is a fine one by James Eayrs, but it was published in 1965. Generations of scholarship dealing with Canada's foreign policy and political history seemingly have passed without the author's notice, and this shows in his inability to fully contextualize Mackenzie King's genuinely embarrassing encounter with Hitler. This is a major flaw in the book.

Finally, while almost all historians make errors, it must be noted that Professor Teigrob has far too many real howlers in his text. This too relates to his evident unfamiliarity with Canadian history. He calls Vincent Massey, the High Commissioner in London, the Ambassador. In the 1930s Canada did not have ambassadors in Britain and still does not. He says King spoke to Lady Aberdeen at a reception in London, but calls her the wife of Governor General Massey; she was the wife of a late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Governor General. He tells us that King gave Hitler a campaign biography of him written by Norman Robertson; Robertson was an official in the Department of External Affairs, and the book was in fact by Norman Rogers who in 1935 became a minister in King's government. Teigrob says that King brought in social welfare legislation during the 1930s; there was none. He has John Diefenbaker as Conservative leader during the Second World War and calls Mackenzie King Canada's head of state, not its head of government. He gets titles and names wrong, and he repeatedly uses "legation" when he means "delegation." There are many more slips.

Individually, such mistakes do not much matter, but in their abundance, they must make readers question the range and carefulness of Professor Teigrob's research and scholarship. How the University of Toronto Press and its academic readers allowed this manuscript to go to the printers with innumerable errors must remain a puzzle. Unfortunately, as Senator Lambert might have said, when we get off a piece, this book doesn't look better and better.

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