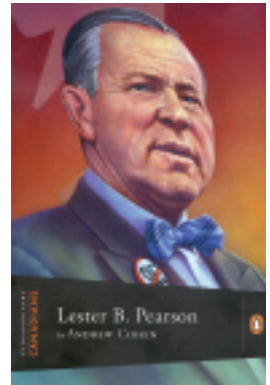


Mike: a man for the middle distance

Andrew Cohen. *Lester B. Pearson*. Toronto, Penguin Books Canada, 2008.

Review by Hilary Pearson



Lester B. Pearson would not have described himself as a haunting man; far from it. But his influence lingers on, well beyond his death. Half a century after he won the Nobel Peace Prize, 40 years after he stepped down as prime minister, his name reappears regularly in the pages of today's newspapers, not just yesterday's history books.

This new short biography of LBP by the journalist Andrew Cohen is an excellent introduction to the reasons for his lingering presence and influence in both foreign and domestic policy discussions. It is not a scholarly book, and carries no footnotes, although it is the fruit of considerable research. Nor is it a detailed critique of Pearson's thought or his strategies. Rather, it is a lyrically written and very readable account intended for a wide Canadian audience. The author's goal is to provide us with some points of reflection on the reasons for the continuing relevance of Pearson in Canadian life.

Cohen has written this reflective summary of Pearson's life at the invitation of John Ralston Saul, who conceived and coordinated a new series of lives of extraordinary Canadians. In his introduction to the series, Saul notes that the planned biographies of 20 key Canadians are centred on the

meaning of their lives to the creation of modern Canada. It is by no means a series devoted only to statesmen. Figures such as Norman Bethune, Nellie McClung, Emily Carr, Marshall McLuhan and Glenn Gould are among the 20, along with Tommy Douglas, Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont. But the only two prime ministers included are Pearson and his successor, Pierre Elliott Trudeau.

Why was Pearson so important to the definition of modern Canada? Cohen answers this question in several stages as he makes his way conventionally through the facts of the life. Each of the major experiences of Pearson's life is touched upon: the

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two world wars, the diplomatic life of London and Washington, the creation of postwar alliances such as NATO and the institutions of the UN, Suez, and finally the last decade of political battle and policy triumph, culminating in the Flag Debate and Centennial Year. The extraordinary events of these years from 1914 to 1968 were indeed critical to the shap-

ing of Canada today, and Pearson was part of it all. Cohen conveys the historical record while keeping his perspective firmly on Pearson the man, whose personal attributes, skills and demeanour were so important to his success in different fields.

Cohen describes a political cartoon that was indeed a favourite of Pearson's and which hangs on the wall in his home study, recreated at Laurier House in Ottawa. This cartoon, drawn by Duncan Macpherson of the *Toronto Star* in April 1964, shows him as a baseball player, dishevelled and sprawling but triumphantly holding up ball (labelled Canadian Unity) in glove as he rescues the day once again. "The Old Smoothie" is the title of the car-

toon. As Cohen astutely points out, this captured something essential about Pearson: that he never took his eye off the ball, no matter how messy or muddling his technique sometimes appeared to be. "Pearson's leadership was always more about direction than detail," Cohen notes. His minority governments were perceived by many to be chaotic and uncertain. But they

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Cohen argues that Pearson's importance to Canada was in his vision of "Canada as an autonomous

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nation, casting off imperial shackles and seizing responsibility, building itself at home and projecting itself abroad." In his view, Pearson was a transformational figure between old and new Canada. Born in small-town, anglophone Ontario in a world where the British Empire was a dominant fact, he made an extraordinary personal journey over the course of his life, dying at the age of 75 in a Canada that recognized its biculturalism, that stood on its own in the world and that was moving rapidly to the urbanized and very diverse country that it is today.

But his contemporaries made much the same journey through the twentieth century. What was it about Pearson himself that led him to become the best known Canadian in the world of his time, as Cohen describes him? The answer lies in the combination of temperament, skill and opportunity that was Pearson's gift. Cohen rightly underlines certain traits of his character: modesty, simplicity, humour, ambition. He was "Mike," not Lester or Michael. That modest image was important to him. But there was a certain temperamental trait, clearly visible to his family and friends, that was essential to his success: his imperturbability. This natural calm was a dominant characteristic. At home, he rarely

frowned and never seemed to lose his temper, criticize or brood. Indeed, in family lore, one of the few times we ever saw him rattled was when contending with a hysterical Judy LaMarsh at 24 Sussex Drive when he had to demote her from her cabinet post. His psychology was not that of a typically ambitious or driven; leader

far from it. His relative lack of ego and his ability to detach himself from turmoil could have left him on the side of many debates. But his strong intelligence and the skill with which he was able to deploy it took him into the battle and gave him the chance to win, particularly in diplomacy.

Cohen again rightly points out Pearson's true and lifelong passion for sports, especially team sports. He loved to play and to watch others playing team games that looked easy but take enormous skill, baseball being one. His family rarely saw him miss a game of baseball on TV, even at the most stress-

ful times of his political life. What he may have so enjoyed about baseball was that combination of skill and opportunity that leads to the winning play. Opportunity was an important key to explaining the success of his own life. He was presented with many. And he took them. As my father Geoffrey Pearson, noted in his own book on the diplomacy of Lester Pearson, he was gifted at "seizing the day." Cohen devotes a chapter to

Pearson and Suez and makes it a thriller, even though we know the outcome. Cohen clearly describes the combination of temperament ("imperturbable centre of the whirlwind"), skill (a deep knowledge of the UN and of the interests and personalities of all parties) and opportunity (a seasoned professional in the right place at the right time) that explains the success of the Suez resolution. I would add, as Cohen does, that Pearson's charm, which was always most evident in the direct personal encounter, had already oiled the gears in his dealings with the Suez antagonists.

Cohen sums up both his biography and his admiring perspective on Lester Pearson in a beautifully written final chapter that takes as its frame the "middle distance." "Had Pearson been a runner rather than a pitcher, he would have been a good man for the middle distance,...steady rather than flashy, pragmatic rather than ideological...But no modern prime minister gave more of himself to his country, spending more than half his life as soldier, diplomat and politician in the service of Canada." The values of his family, the

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gifts of his temperament and intelligence and the opportunities of his century gave him the chance to live an extraordinary life for Canada. This biography does him justice in capturing the essential man in his time.

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