

Outlook on Lifestyle

Fun of anecdotes in the eye of the beholder

By ALLAN GOULD
The wit and satisfaction we obtain from anecdotes are, like beauty, very much in the eye of the beholder. The astronomical growth in interest in gossip and anecdotal stories that we have seen in the past few years is reflected in the success of such magazines as People and such television programs as Entertainment Tonight and Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous. So it is with great pleasure that the new Oxford Book of Canadian Political Anecdotes, edited by professor and humorist Jack McLeod (Oxford,

273 pages, \$24.95) can be described as very witty and very satisfying, indeed.

There are many disappointments, of course, in a book that ranges from Samuel de Champlain sailing up the St. Lawrence River in 1603 to a 1986 statement by Brian Mulroney ("I am not denying anything I did not say"). In between, we get a fair number of unfunny, senseless, and not particularly impressive anecdotes, and quite a few others that don't seem to belong in a book of this kind. (It's delightful to read that the great humorist Stephen

Leacock used to take letters that he had written and throw them out on the lawn outside his McGill office. "He explained that it saved him a trip down to the mailbox: some passerby seeing a heap of addressed letters would post them.") But is that really a "political anecdote," merely because the writer once opposed Laurier on Reciprocity with the United States back in 1911?

But why complain? The many dozens of wonderful stories, tales and one-liners contained in this book help give an often profound sense of this country's history, as

well as leadership, and it is good to read just how charming and even comedic our politicians have been.

Many are familiar, such as the inebriated prime minister of Canada, Sir John A. Macdonald, telling D'Arcy McGee, "Look here... two drunkards is too much for any government and one of us has to stop, so I suggest you quit." Ditto with Macdonald's quietly profound statement that "anybody may support me when I am right. What I want is a man that will support me when I am wrong!"

What is less known - and all the more delightful to discover - is the

fact that Sir Wilfrid Laurier was obsessed with Abraham Lincoln, even delivering a lecture in 1889 in which he presented the entire Gettysburg Address in French. Or the wise wit of suffragette Nellie McClung, who once proclaimed, "You men say 'women are angels' and you plead that politics are corrupting... therefore you can't get women into public life too soon, since there is a shortage of angels in politics."

There is some pain to be encountered amongst these hundreds of anecdotes as well. It is still acutely embarrassing to read that our longest-serving prime minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King, saw Hitler as "a genuine patriot," a "simple peasant," and a man "with whom it should be possible to work with a good deal of trust and confidence," and actually wrote in his diaries that the man who would soon cause the deaths of more than 50 million people "is a pilgrim - his love of music - of Wagner Opera - his habits, abstinence, purity, vegetarian, etc., all evidence of the mystic who is conscious of his mission and lives up to it."

Ahh, but what a joy to read of how Vincent Massey's obnoxious anglophilia was cut to the quick during the Second World War, when a vice-chancellor of a British university declared (after hearing Massey rave about how the English "were the only people in the world who knew how to rule others justly and effectively"): "And in what respect, Vincent, do you consider that ideology different from the one we are fighting?"

And what of the harrasing of John Diefenbaker by the Liberals, such as the time the federal government rented an empty house next to his home at Prince Albert and converted it into a foster residence for unwed Indian mothers. Or the fact that the only time Lester Pearson ever used the hot-line to Washington was in 1967, when the transmission of his car broke while he was on his way to his summer residence. He phoned the US capital to arrange for a tow truck to be sent out from downtown Ottawa.

There are other great moments: Media guru Marshall McLuhan writing Pierre Trudeau about why the prime minister was so successful: "Your corporate mask, you charisma, is both powerful and very popular with the young, in part because of the subtle hint in your image of 'mask' of the native Indian. As you know, the Red Man is very powerful with the TV generation since he is Third World, and they are also Third World."

There are other great jokes; Dief used to howl at the one about a Toronto man who is convicted of murder in Quebec, and makes one last request before his hanging: "I'd like to learn French."

But more than anything, this marvelous collection of Canadian political anecdotes is a superb way to get a comic sense of our often fascinating history, and even save thousands of dollars. Why? Because the books from which most of these stories are drawn number many dozens, and this volume is, in fact, a kind of "best of," from the finest political biographies and autobiographies of our century. For that alone, many thanks.

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