

Book review

P.M. Lester Pearson just in right place at right time

By JACK McLEOD

The mythology surrounding Lester B. "Mike" Pearson suggests he was an improbable prime minister. Internationally, he was the best-known Canadian. Domestically, his record was at best mixed. The orthodox view has been that early in his career he was in the right place at the right time, more lucky than shrewd, a diplomat with a gift for genial compromise but a softie, too "nice" a guy for the rough and tumble of politics, too glibless to be a match for the tempestuous John Diefenbaker. In his own smooth autobiography, Pearson gave further substance to this myth.

The inner man usually remains elusive, and the mainsprings of Mike are more elusive than most. But a new biography throws sharp light on the myths. In John English's *Shadow of Heaven: The Life of Lester Pearson, Volume One: 1897-1948* (Lester and Orpen Dennys 432 pages, \$28.95), we have a sympathetic and incisive account of both the public and the private man. It's a brilliant and satisfying book, one of the best biographies of recent years, and it has "Governor General's Award" written all over it.

Pearson comes through as determined and tough-minded. Prof. English shows him as a self-deprecating and charming man whose affable exterior cloaked a backbone of steel. We learn how much Mike's character was forged in his father's parsonage, in Victoria College and in the Methodist church. Ambition propelled him, and he hated to lose.

After service in the First World War, a post-graduate scholarship to Oxford expanded his horizons, but he shone neither as a soldier nor as a scholar. The implication is that Pearson returned from wartime service still a teetotaler and a virgin; he (like Dief) never saw action, and was afflicted by "neurasthenia" or nervous collapse. Brief flings with legal studies and in business ended in failure, and although he taught history at the University of Toronto for three years, his post there would have been as athletic director and football coach had he stayed. Pearson was not lured away from academia, but astutely

sought and won a job with External Affairs.

PASSED OVER

Diplomatic postings in London, Geneva, Ottawa and Washington demonstrated his capacity for hard work, congeniality and compromise. He won the admiration of two prime ministers, R.B. Bennett and Mackenzie King, but was passed over in 1941 for the job of Under-Secretary of External and seems to have played a less important role in the foundation of the United Nations than is generally supposed. However, when Mike entered the cabinet in 1948, King pro-

phesied that Pearson would some day become prime minister.

The author is a fine, crisp stylist. Impeccable scholarship never interferes with the flow of the story, and the author moves nimbly from political narrative to vivid background perspectives and back to psychological insights. English is scrupulous in weighing Pearson's own account of events in his memoirs against the historical evidence and reaching balanced conclusions. The laughable charges in FBI files that Mike was a "fellow-traveller" or Soviet agent are met head on; the full tale of Herbert Norman's suicide is promised for a later volume.

Perhaps most fascinating is the skilful analysis of Pearson's character. Now it is easier to see how the smiling Liberal leader with the engaging lisp could survive scandals in his government, exasperate his advisors and cabinet, and abandon (betray?) decent colleagues such as Guy Favreau and Walter Gordon. Pearson could dodge and vacillate, but he was no stranger to vanity or ruthlessness. It's English's judgment that Mike "responded to events and persons in a manner normally emotional and intuitive rather than intellectual..." but seldom without a sure instinct for applause and self-preservation.

When the next volume is published, there will long lineups of eager buyers, with me alongside them.

—Jack McLeod, a history professor at the University of Toronto, is co-editor (with Cynthia Smith) of *Sir John A. - An Anecdotal Life*.

DATE BOOK

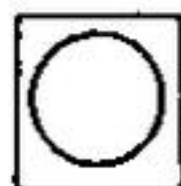
Today is the 13th day of 1990 and the 24th day of winter.

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TODAY'S HISTORY: On this day in 1966, Robert C. Weaver, the first black ever nominated to the U.S. cabinet, was named secretary of the new Department of Housing and Urban Development.

TODAY'S BIRTHDAYS: Salmon P. Chase (1808-1873), U.S. jurist; Sophie Tucker (1884-1966), singer; Robert Stack (1919-), actor; Gwen Verdon (1926-), actress; Charles Nelson Reilly (1931-), actor; Brandon Tartikoff (1949-), TV executive; Jay McInerney (1955-), writer.

TODAY'S QUOTE: "I've been rich and I've been poor; rich is better." — Sophie Tucker

TODAY'S MOON: Between full moon (Jan. 11) and last quarter (Jan. 18). 

TODAY'S BARBS
BY PHIL PASTORET

We had an uncle who was far ahead of the electronic age. He was quarts-powered and got wound-up all the time.

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RONNIE HAWKINS

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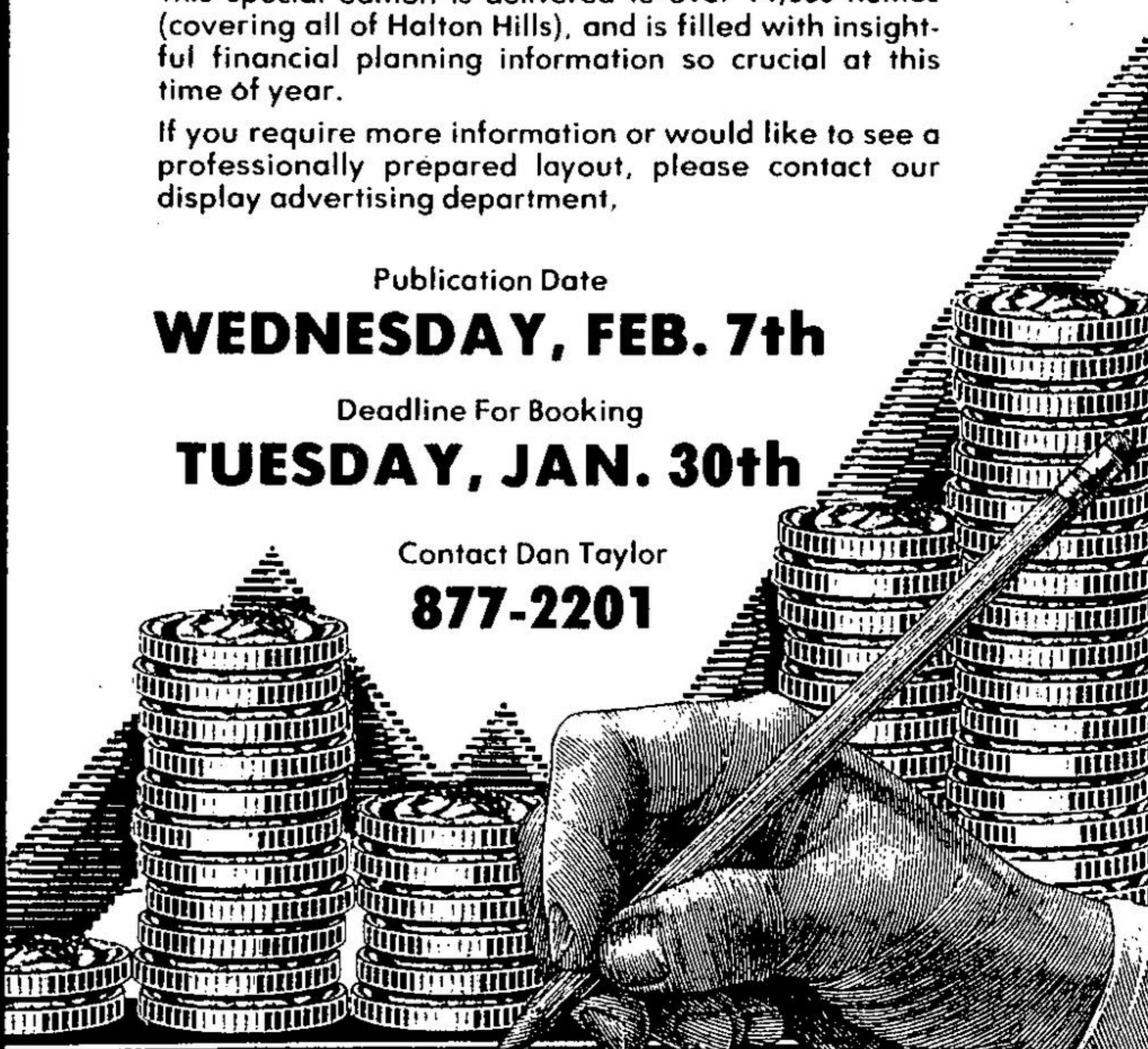
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