

**Book Review**

**Brilliant,  
incisive  
commentary**

By JACK McLEOD

What can we expect in the autobiography of a cranky letter-to-the-editor writer and constitutional authority like Eugene Forsey? What in the world might we expect of a Conservative, comrade-in-arms of prime minister Arthur Meighen, a scholar who became a founding father of the CCF but declined to join the NDP, a man who was a friend of (and offered a Commons seat by) John Diefenbaker but who later sat in the Senate as a Trudeau Liberal?

What we should expect, and what Forsey handsomely delivers, is brilliant and incisive commentary on the rule of law, the constitution, neglected historical facts, and deep respect for our traditions and institutions. A Life on the Fringe: The Memoirs of Eugene Forsey (Oxford University Press, 241 pages, \$24.95) is an exuberant, witty, graceful account of a distinguished public career. It is a splendid book. I cannot think of another work in the field of Canadian politics that I've found more instructive or entertaining during the past decade.

If you could combine the flavor and prose of an Old Testament prophet, an Oxford don and a Newfy fisherman, you might come close to the crackling style of Dr. Forsey. Many a professor will urge this book on students as a model of sharp, terse writing.

Forsey's modesty is charming but excessive. Far from being "on the fringe," he has been close to the central political action and passion of his times since the 1930s. He reports on the people and events of six decades with insight and acumen.

**SHARPEST**

But the story that emerges is not so much personal as intellectual, the story of ideas and conflict over ideas. Forsey has always fought the good fight, and fought it boldly, in defence of political morality and principles. Although there are fascinating chapters on his days at McGill as student and teacher, on his 27 years with the Canadian Labor Congress, on his years with the Board of Broadcast Governors and in the Senate (an institution that he defends stoutly). Forsey's pen is sharpest in writing about ignorance and abuses concerning the constitution, the rule of law and the pretensions of Quebec nationalism.

Forsey was a champion and practitioner of bilingualism long before it became fashionable. He was a friend and admirer of Pierre Trudeau before Trudeau was a Liberal candidate. Forsey's break with the NDP was a rejection of the concept of "deux nations." In a slashing chapter on Quebec nationalism, he demonstrates why he sat in the Senate "as a Trudeau Liberal because I was John A Macdonald Conservative," his political principles consistent and clear.

Separtists he calls "honest." Those who endorse sovereignty-association he calls "dishonest" for demanding both independence for Quebec and the right to remain within Canada. Those who kowtow to the "incremental sovereignists" with blather about "two founding nations," he labels "appeasers," weak-minded pseudo-intellectuals who swallow "pseudo-history." The chapter on Quebec nationalism is a gleaming gem, itself worth the price of the volume.

My only complaint is that the work is too short. I fervently wish the Hon. Eugene Forsey long life and many more publications.

This book is not merely great fun, but also important, a book to treasure by a man who is a national treasure.

Jack McLeod is a professor of political science at the University of Toronto.  
-Thomson News Service.

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