Book Review: The Life and Political Times of Tommy Douglas

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Stewart is right to think that we need a thoughtful reappraisal of this iconic figure. Unfortunately, this book does not fill the bill.

Stewart retells in breezy prose the main events in Douglas's life: the Scottish working-class roots; his training as a Baptist preacher during which he embraced the social gospel over fundamentalist theology; the call to Calvary Baptist Church in Weyburn, Saskatchewan, in the 1930s Depression; election to the House of Commons in 1935; five consecutive terms as the most progressive premier in the country; and a spirited, though failed, effort to project prairie socialism onto the national scene. The author knows that Douglas was a more complex person than he is generally assumed to have been. He mentions the socialist leader's pugnacity (he was 1922 Manitoba lightweight boxing champion at the cost of "a broken nose, a couple of teeth out, a strained right hand, and a sprained thumb") and the entrepreneurial instincts that led him, while serving as premier, to invest in a mink ranch and a drive-in movie theatre. Stewart devotes six pages to Douglas's 1932 M.A. thesis, a treatise that endorsed eugenic sterilization of the mentally defective, and agonizes over a letter Douglas wrote in April 1945 expressing anti-Japanese Canadian prejudices. Although Stewart is willing to acknowledge that his hero had flaws as well as great qualities of intellect and force of character, he fails to knit together the various elements of Douglas's makeup to present a coherent portrait. At the end of the book, the reader still does not know the inner man. Stewart quotes a close political ally of Douglas who said of him: "He was not a man you could get to know, really. There was always this private part of himself that never got revealed." Friends can leave it at that; from a biographer we expect something more.

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