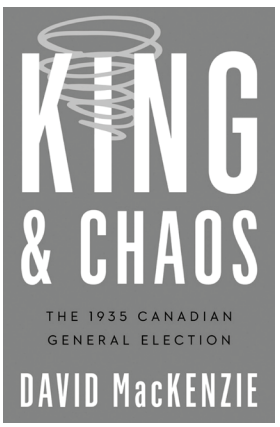
Apologia Pro Mackenzie King

Prof. MacKenzie's election analysis is surprisingly biased — writes J.W. J. Bowden

King and Chaos: The 1935 Canadian General Election. David MacKenzie. UBC Press, 2023.

David MacKenzie, a Professor of History at the university in Toronto formerly known as Ryerson, has written *King and Chaos: The 1935 Canadian Elections*, the third entry in UBC's series on Turning Point Elections. The election that year was certainly a turning point, returning William Lyon Mackenzie King to power for his third and final non-consecutive term as Prime Minister, and launching 22 years of uninterrupted Liberal rule to 1957.



Among the Great Depression's horrors, outlined in the introduction, was a commodities collapse and a descent into protectionism that hit Canada especially hard given its dependence on trade. Unemployment peaked at around one-third — which did not include the under-employed or the declines in wages that most remaining workers faced — and never dropped below 10% in the thirties. The Depression hit hardest in 1933, by which time *per capita* income dropped 40% in New Brunswick compared to 1929 and a staggering 70% in Saskatchewan. A prolonged drought on the Prairies from 1934 to 1939 blew away the topsoil and destroyed farmland. The CPR had to use snow plows in the summer to clear soil drifts ten feet high. The same calamities today would probably provoke revolution because we now expect more from the State, and no one in the workforce today has ever experienced anything like the ravages of that decade.

The first chapter, on "Depression Politics," examines federal politics from 1930 to 1935 from the points of view of Bennett as Prime Minister, King as leader of the opposition, and Henry Stevens, the dissident who resigned from Bennett's cabinet in 1934 and formed his own Reconstruction Party. Stevens was inspired by the conclusion of the Royal Commission on Price Spreads that oligopolistic grocers and department stores were conspiring to gouge customers and underpay employees.

The second chapter "What's Left and Who's Right?" deals with the turmoil in provincial politics of the mid-1930s, when voters ousted Conservative governments in all nine provinces, as well as the rise of two populist parties which purported to offer solutions to the Great Depression: Social Credit on the right and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation on the left. They both traced their origins to the catch-all populist Progressive Party of the 1920s which had by 1935 fully disintegrated at the federal level and survived only in Manitoba. Chapter 3, "It's Time for a New Deal," outlines how R. B. Bennett decided in the dying days of the 17th Parliament to emulate President Roosevelt and embrace a reformed capitalism as a New Deal to inoculate the population against

hard socialism. Chapter 4 ("The Campaign Begins") covers the platforms of the Conservatives, Liberals, CCF, and Social Credit as all the parties struggled to pay election bills and buy advertising. Liberals, for example, could not afford to pay *Maclean's* for a full double-page ad in 1935.

New Deal

Bennett first introduced his program in a series of radio addresses in Jan. 1935 without having consulted or even informed his cabinet and caucus beforehand and then convened an extraordinary sixth session of Parliament on Jan. 17. Bennett thus embraced at the eleventh hour the sort of state intervention he had rejected for five years. This abrupt about-face struck many observers as a cynical and desperate ploy, much as Liberal leadership candidates early this year suddenly denounced the carbon tax (sorry, "price on carbon") which they had promoted as necessary for 15 years and defended in the House of Commons as recently as December.

Bennett's New Deal corresponded more closely to what Stevens, his former Minister of Trade and Commerce, had advocated in 1934, and over which, along with other disagreements with Bennett over minimum wages and maximum working hours, he resigned from cabinet before the year was out. The Speech from the Throne acknowledged "grave defects and abuses in the capitalist system" which "require modifications in the capitalist system" so that it can better "serve the people" and "remedy the social and economic injustices now prevailing to ensure to all classes and to all parties of the country a greater degree of equality in the distribution of the benefits of the capitalist system."*

Bennett could play little role in promoting his own program because he suffered a heart attack and a seizure in Feb. 1935 and had to convalesce for several weeks. When he emerged in mid-April, he decided to go to London for a month to represent Canada at King George V's Silver Jubilee. He thus failed to take advantage of the momentum that his new program could have given the Conservatives in a spring election.

For his part, King resented Bennett's New Deal and complained in his diary that Bennett had stolen his ideas and plagiarised his book *Industry and Humanity*. But he also correctly predicted that Bennett's desperate about-face would divide the Conservatives. Four ministers remained hostile or sceptical to the measures, but Bennett refused to resign in part because he could not accept that his rival Stevens would probably succeed him. King decided that the Liberals would support Bennett's legislation and fast-track it through the Commons and Senate instead of opposing it.

Reconstruction Party

In 1935, Stevens formed the breakaway Reconstruction Party which succeeded only in splitting the vote and electing him as its sole MP. Stevens began to turn maverick in Jan. 1934 when he delivered a speech in lieu of Bennett to the Retail Shoe Merchants and Shoe Manufacturers Association in Toronto, denouncing corporations for paying their employees too little, charging their customers too much, and turning themselves into an oligopoly — which suggests that not much has changed in some sectors of the Canadian economy.

Stevens's reformist turn in some ways laid the groundwork for John Bracken, who insisted on adding "Progressive" to the name of the Conservative Party when he became leader in 1942, though MacKenzie does not make this connection. John Diefenbaker was another Western maverick who opposed the Tory Establishment in Toronto and advocated populist and even centre-left policies. Later when in office he increased social spending and ran deficits — all at odds with Conservative orthodoxy.

The CCF

The CCF pledged in its Regina Manifesto in 1933 and its electoral platform in 1935 to "eradicate capitalism and put into operation the full programme of socialized planning which will lead to the establishment in Canada of the Co-operative Commonwealth."

* His Excellency the Governor General, "The Speech from the Throne," in Senate Debates, Jan. 17, 1935.

This party, predecessor to the NDP, adopted hard but ostensibly democratic socialism — flowing, however, from the Social Gospel of its Methodist and Presbyterian leaders who embraced pacifism but lacked the worldwide ambitions of the Communist International. Here MacKenzie overestimates the influence of the CCF on federal elections and parliaments.

He argues that the advent of the CCF marked "a turning point in Canadian federal politics" as the first viable third party that could potentially form a government. He dismisses the Progressives of the 1920s as "more regional in nature" even though they had elected 50 members from five provinces (British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, and New Brunswick) in 1921, while the CCF got a mere seven candidates elected in only three provinces (B.C., Saskatchewan, and Manitoba) in 1935.

Incredibly, the author claims that Bennett was 'indifferent to the ravages of the Depression' despite the Prime Minister's numerous letters by hand enclosing personal cheques.

MacKenzie declares that as of 1935, "Now a Conservative defeat no longer meant — almost by definition — a Liberal victory, or vice versa. Canadian voters had another choice." First, Canada had already crossed that Rubicon in the 1920s, not in 1935, and elected a series of three *de facto* minority parliaments in 1921, 1925, and 1926. In fact, the Progressives formed the second-largest party in 1921 ahead of the Conservatives but declined to serve as the Official Opposition. Second, only the Liberals or Conservatives have ever formed a government in Ottawa in the 90 years since 1935.

Social Credit

MacKenzie describes social credit (the idea) as a sort of non-socialist monetary reform and deliberately inflationary policy, which appealed to small property owners in the West who strongly opposed the CCF. Given that inflation had dropped to -3% by Sep. 1930 and remained close to 0% until Nov. 1935, a deliberately inflationary policy where the government grants income supplements (i.e. "social credit") might not have seemed so strange or dangerous.† MacKenzie contradicts himself on whether Social Credit (the party) ran in all four Western Provinces or only in B.C., Alberta, and Saskatchewan; in either case, neither B.C. nor Manitoba returned any Socreds in 1935. Stevens and Aberhart negotiated a non-aggression pact where the Reconstructionists ran candidates against Social Credit only in Edmonton and Calgary.

1935 Election

Bennett's Tories campaigned on their legislative record, such as creating the Bank of Canada and the Canadian Wheat Board, and putting an upper limit on interest rates and loans. The New Deal brought minimum wages and a maximum eight-hour day and 48-hour week. The Conservatives also argued that their higher tariffs had protected Canada from further losses. Bennett at first presented his reformed capitalism as the bulwark against socialism but then campaigned on law and order and combatting subversives within Canada instead of focusing on the New Deal. In contrast, King portrayed the Liberals as the defenders of "liberty, responsible government, and the authority of parliament" and promised a new trade agreement with the United States which stopped short of free trade because he believed that lowering tariffs would help end the Depression. King was characteristically cautious, letting the Conservatives and Reconstructionists split the vote, though he also denounced Social Credit and the CCF as chancers and accused Stevens of having plagiarized the name of his party from *Industry and Humanity.* The

† Statistics Canada, Consumer Price Index Data Visualization Tool, Price Trends: 1928 to 1940.

Reconstructionists, CCF, and Social Credit all railed against the establishment and the two main parties, competing for the same voters. King sought to present the Liberals as a credible reform alternative and ran on the alliterative slogan of "King or Chaos."

Radio had become ubiquitous by 1935. While an overbearing Bennett dominated the Conservative campaign, King, sensing his personal unpopularity, allowed other leading Liberals to speak on broadcasts. Most of the daily newspapers had turned against Bennett and supported the Liberals by 1935, even the *Financial Post* and *Maclean's*. Books also played an important role in the campaign in a way that they usually do not in Canadian politics. (Preston Manning's semi-autobiographical *The New Canada,* published in 1992, may be another exception.) Andrew MacLaren wrote a promotional biography entitled succinctly *R. B. Bennett, Prime Minister of Canada* and Norman Rogers, a Liberal candidate and professor at Queen's, revised John Lewis's earlier biography, *Mackenzie King*. King also re-released a revised and abridged version of his own book, *Industry and Humanity*, in 1935.

Aftermath

On Oct. 14, 1935, the Liberals won 44.8% of the popular vote and 173 out of 245 seats. They won all the seats in PEI and Nova Scotia, all but one in New Brunswick, and all but six in Quebec. They made their greatest gains in Ontario and also captured ten of Manitoba's seventeen seats and sixteen of Saskatchewan's 21. Social Credit won fifteen of Alberta's seventeen and two in Saskatchewan. The CCF won three in B.C., two in Saskatchewan, and two in Manitoba with 8.8% of the popular vote.

This left the Conservatives with a rump of 39, two-thirds from Ontario, based on 29.8% of the popular vote. Henry Stevens became the sole Reconstruction MP even though the party captured 8.7% of the vote. The combined shares of the Conservatives and the breakaway Reconstructionists comes to 38.5%. King led the Liberals to another majority in 1940 and a large plurality in 1945 and remained prime minister until resigning of his own accord in 1948; he died two years later. Bennett also continued to lead the Conservative Party in opposition until 1938, after which he moved the United Kingdom and gained a peerage as Viscount Bennett of Mickleham, Calgary, and Hopewell and sat in the House of Lords until his death in 1947.

King vs. Bennett

MacKenzie describes Bennett as an autocrat "quick to anger when orders went unobeyed" who also "inspired fear more than loyalty." While Bennett possessed "energy, intelligence, and quickness of mind" and undertook "decisive action," he also suffered from brusque arrogance. Bennett dominated in other ways, taking on both external affairs and finance himself in a "one-man show." However, MacKenzie does not acknowledge that *all* prime ministers from 1912 to 1948, including Mackenzie King, served as their own foreign minister. Nor does MacKenzie point out that Sir John A. Macdonald served as Attorney General and Minister of Justice from 1867 to 1873, that Alexander Mackenzie took on the portfolio of Public Works from 1873 to 1878, and that Macdonald again assumed various other portfolios from 1878 to 1891. This makes Bennett's multiple portfolios less extraordinary. In contrast, MacKenzie describes King as occasionally "overbearing and moralistic" and a wily political procrastinator who "avoid[ed] decisions and extend[ed] negotiations," but praises him as "intelligent and one of the hardest-working politicians of his, or any other, era" who sympathised with "the average person over the plutocrats."

MacKenzie later asserts that "Bennett lost as much as he won in politics, whereas King was the perennial victor." That curiously one-sided statement seems all the more astounding given that King had lost decisively to Bennett in the previous election. Indeed King was hardly a resounding winner. He won only a *de facto* minority in his first outing in 1921, when the Liberals barely hit the threshold for a majority with 118 seats in a House of 235. In Oct. 1925, King lost his seat in York North, and Arthur Meighen's Conservatives beat him with 115 MPs, eight short

of a bare majority in an expanded House of 245 — as compared to 100 seats for the Liberals. King managed to hold on as leader, reentering the House a few months later in a by-election in Feb. 1926.

Then in June 1926 King infamously resigned when Lord Byng rejected his constitutional advice to dissolve parliament, though King did manage to win back a plurality (*not* a majority) in Sep. 1926, with 116 Liberals versus 91 Conservatives. In fact, King, the "perennial victor," did not even lead the Liberals to a majority until 1935, and though he kept that majority in 1940 he lost it in 1945. King is less "perennial victor" than a wily survivor who knew how to work with the Progressives and CCF to stay in office. (MacKenzie does later acknowledge that King lost his own riding in 1925.)

The author calls King the 'perennial victor' — all the more astounding given that King had lost decisively to Bennett in the previous election.

Again quite incredibly, MacKenzie claims that Bennett showed himself "indifferent to the ravages of the Depression" despite the Prime Minister's numerous letters by hand enclosing personal cheques to struggling Canadians who appealed to him. MacKenzie's ideological bias asserts itself again when he says Bennett was out of touch because he "restored the granting of aristocratic titles in Canada [which] his Conservative predecessor Sir Robert Borden had outlawed back in 1919."

This is an egregious error, as Borden did not outlaw anything and there is nothing objectively un-Canadian or unpopular about titles of honour. The Nickle Resolution of 1919 merely expressed the opinion of the Commons; it did not enact a statute and in fact it expired upon the dissolution of the 13th Parliament in 1921. It is not and has never been binding on any subsequent Parliament.

What Bennett did do was to reinforce Canadian sovereignty under the Statute of Westminster, 1931. As he explained to the House of Commons, he had advised the King of Canada directly, as Prime Minister of the Dominion, on the Canadians to appoint to the Order of the British Empire, instead of relying (as Prime Ministers had in the past) on British ministers to pass on suggestions to the King as was normal before the Great War.*

MacKenzie portrays Bennett as an aloof autocrat who hoarded cabinet portfolios and imposed iron rule on the Conservative parliamentary party. He also repeats the obligatory contemporary joke that when Bennett was walking down Wellington Street from the Chateau Laurier to Parliament Hill and talking to himself, he was holding a cabinet meeting. For goodness sake it could equally be said of Mackenzie King, who appointed himself to External Affairs while also serving as Prime Minister.

But while transparently hostile to Bennett, MacKenzie offers qualified praise to his government, which "to its credit" established the Canadian Wheat Board and the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission, forerunner to the CBC. MacKenzie shows much more sympathy overall to King, perhaps for ideological reasons — but also perhaps because King's diaries give more direct insight and naturally make the historian feel more connected, as I have also experienced. Historians have to be on their guard because the paucity of primary source material on Bennett, apart from the surviving letters, makes him a more distant figure easy to caricature. Bennett's insistence on wearing morning suits daily instead of the lounge suits that had become the norm, also exposes him to Penguinesque caricature.

Section 98

MacKenzie weaves a narrative throughout the book on the former section 98 of the *Criminal Code,* which the Union Government brought in after the Winnipeg General Strike

* R.B. Bennett, House of Commons *Debates*, Jan. 30, 1934, p. 96.

of 1919. He does not approve at all that Conservative Prime Ministers Borden, Meighen, and Bennett applied it against Communists. The provision said:

> "Any association [...] whose professed purpose [...] is to bring about any governmental, industrial or economic change within Canada by use of force, violence or physical injury to person or property, or by threats of such injury, or which teaches, advocates, advises or defends the use of force, violence, terrorism, or physical injury to person or property [...] shall be an unlawful association."*

It seems obvious and reasonable that plotting to overthrow the State through violence should be illegal. By definition, no liberal democracy can tolerate a group or an individual who tries to overthrow the government or establish a parallel power by violence — in other words, to commit acts of terrorism and break the State's monopoly on the use of force. We in liberal democracies can organize ourselves into political parties, advocate a program, try to convince enough of our fellow citizens to support that program in free elections, elect enough MPs to form a government or at least influence a government, and then enact these policies through legislation. Yet MacKenzie *laments* that Tory prime ministers applied s. 98 against self-described communists who by definition wanted not merely to abolish capitalism but to do so through force of arms.

MacKenzie admits, moreover, that these same Tory leaders never applied s. 98 against legitimate democratic socialist political parties like the CCF or Independent Labour, or against sitting left-wing MPs like J.S. Woodsworth, which should make it obvious that the Tories properly differentiated between legitimate political expression and terrorism.

Borden did not outlaw knighthoods and there is nothing un-Canadian or unpopular about titles. The Nickle Resolution of 1919 merely expressed the opinion of the Commons at a particular time.

MacKenzie also equates Bennett's decision in 1933 to nominate worthy Canadians for knighthoods with his use of s. 98 of the *Criminal Code* in 1931 to "arrest the leaders of the small Canadian Communist Party" as if the two had anything to do with one another. I would suggest that only through the distortion of an egalitarian lens can the two topics be paired in this way.

Bennett pledged on the campaign trail to keep in place s. 98 (which, as MacKenzie says, "ma[de] it illegal to advocate, publish, or promote the use of violence to overthrow the government"), while the Liberals and CCF promised to repeal it. Here MacKenzie does not mention that King kept his promise and that Parliament repealed the offending provision in 1936.†

Yet today section 46(2)(a) of the *Criminal Code*, which dates from the mid-1970s in the aftermath of the October Crisis, defines treason as the use of "force or violence for the purpose of overthrowing the government of Canada or a province." Thus conspiring to overthrow the government by force remains treasonable and using physical force to effect political change would at the very least qualify as assault. In other words, the *Criminal Code* contains roughly similar provisions today, and the Supreme Court of Canada has ruled that our freedom of association under the *Charter* does not include belonging to or-

* Thomas Berger, *Fragile Freedoms: Human Rights and Dissent in Canada* (Clarke, Irwin, 1981), p. 132–3.

† House of Commons Bills, 18th Parliament, 1st Session, 1 Edward VIII, 1936, Bill 96, An Act to amend the Criminal Code, at image 1076. "Section ninety-eight of the Criminal Code, chapter thirty-six of the Revised Statutes of Canada, 1927, is repealed."

ganizations which undertake violence.‡ Does MacKenzie object?

MacKenzie makes one mention of a certain Fred Rose, the Communist who sat in the House under the auspices of "Labour," not the CCF, without acknowledging that Rose, in fact, did commit treason against Canada by spying for the Soviet Union from 1925 until his criminal conviction and automatic expulsion from the Commons in 1947.§ Surely, that significant fact merited at least a footnote, especially when MacKenzie objects so strongly to s. 98 on grounds that "Communists" were mere phantoms.

Turning Point

Disappointingly, MacKenzie asserts that the election of 1935 was a turning point but does not sufficiently explain why.

> The federal election of 1935 marked a turning point, with the breaking once and for all of the old two-party system. It was the first election where there were five major parties competing and in which a significant percentage of the voting public turned in new directions. The election results also reflected the growing regional divisions in the country, especially in terms of Western alienation, and Western Canada emerged as an important bloc in Canadian politics. The West could no longer be ignored, and Westerners showed themselves willing to turn their backs on the traditional party system in favour of new parties of a variety of political stripes, from the left to the right. Thanks largely to the Depression, Canadian politics was reinventing itself.

MacKenzie's synopsis more aptly describes the election of 1921, which Barbara Messamore is covering for the Turning Points series. In that election the Conservative-Liberal Unionist Coalition broke down and the old two-party system went with it. In 1921, Canadians elected a near-minority parliament with 118 Liberal MPs opposite only 49 Conservatives, three Independent Labour, two United Farmers of Alberta, one United Framer of Ontario, and 58 Progressives based mainly in the Prairies and rural Ontario.

The subsequent minority parliaments of 1925 and 1926, and even the majority parliament elected in 1930, all also contained a diminishing contingent of populist Progressives and United Farmers of Alberta and Ontario. Contrary to MacKenzie, "the West" as a whole did not abandon the Liberals in 1935, given that they won sixteen of Saskatchewan's 21 seats and ten of Manitoba's seventeen. The Liberals lost *half* the West in 1935, capturing only six of BC's sixteen seats and one of Alberta's seventeen. The four Western Provinces would not abandon the Liberals in unison until the general election of 1957, the subject of John C. Courtney's book in this series.¶

The election of 1935 could still count as a turning point but not for the reasons MacKenzie offers.

First, the populist Progressives who first burst onto the federal scene in 1921 had by 1935 splintered into right-wing and left-wing elements. Second, every general election since 1935 has returned some democratic socialists. Third, 1935 marked the beginning of 22 years of uninterrupted Liberal rule and started the Conservatives' descent into infighting. The 49 years from 1935 to 1984 saw the Liberals in power for 42 years, seven months, and 15 days, punctuated by the erratic five years and nine months of Diefenbaker (1957-1963) and the less consequential nine months of the innumerate Joseph Clark (1979-80). In other words, the Conservatives managed to stay in office for only six and a half years in a half-century.

The Liberals truly became as of 1935 what Liberal cabinet minister Jack Pickersgill called "The Government Party" (later phrased

‡ Suresh v Canada (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration), 2002 SCC 1 at para 107. "It is established that s. 2 of the Charter does not protect expressive or associational activities that constitute violence."

§ William Lyon Mackenzie King (Prime Minister of Canada), "Representation – Electoral District of Cartier" and "Writ Ordered for Election of New Member," House of Commons *Debates*, 20th Parliament, 3rd Session, 11 George VI, 1947, Volume I, Thursday, 30 January 1947, at pages 3-4.

¶ *Revival and Change: The 1957 and 1958 Diefenbaker Elections* (UBC Press, 2022).

as "the natural governing party") of the mid-20th century. This half-century of defeat and incompetence was seared into the psyche of generations of federal Conservatives. Since 1984, however, the Conservatives have done much better at governing and creating a semblance of democratic alternation in Canada; between the fall of 1984 and the end of 2024, the Liberals formed government for about 21 years and 5 months compared to 18 years and 10 months for the Conservatives.

Creating the welfare state exposed a paradox in the division of powers under the *British North America Act*. While the federal order of government held the tax revenue and resources to finance the welfare state, the provinces held responsibility for delivering it. But MacKenzie misses the opportunity here to expand upon his correct observation that the election of 1935 began 60 years of constitutional wrangling.

For instance, he notes on page 213 that the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council struck down much of Bennett's New Deal in 1937 because the federal legislation waded into areas of provincial jurisdiction. But he does *not* mention that King, having campaigned in 1935 on basic social welfare such as unemployment insurance, kept his promise and implemented it by negotiating with the provinces while signalling Canada's request and consent that the Imperial Parliament enact the *British North America Act, 1940*, which assigned unemployment insurance to the Parliament of Canada.

Here indeed was a turning point, one that launched the continuous federal-provincial tensions of executive federalism and a half-century of constitutional wrangling on patriating and amending the *BNA Act* that did not peter out until Canadians rejected the *Charlottetown Accord* in 1992.

MacKenzie writes that "by the end of the new decade Mackenzie King's Liberals were well on their way to implementing — apparently without any sense of irony — many of the policies of Bennett's New Deal." But why would this elicit irony? King's opposition Liberals called Bennett's bluff by supporting his New Deal legislation in the spring of 1935, and King believed it had all been his idea in the first place.

The election of 1935 could qualify as a Turning Point because it led to the end of National Policy tariffs on which Canada depended from 1878 to the Great Depression. MacKenzie alludes to this in the preface but leaves it undeveloped. Bennett used high tariffs as leverage. While he got Imperial Preference at the Commonwealth Conference in Ottawa in 1932, he failed to achieve a trade agreement with the U.S. He then visited Roosevelt in Washington in 1933 and expressed interest in lowering tariffs — but Roosevelt dragged out negotiations until after Canada's election in the hope that he would obtain better terms from King. A month later, King and Roosevelt announced a new trade agreement with mutual Most Favoured Nation status and reduced tariffs.

MacKenzie leaves unexplained the title of his book, *King and Chaos*, a play on the Liberals' campaign slogan "King or chaos." Does he assume most readers are familiar with the Liberals' campaign slogan? While he does allude to the swirling maelstrom of misery which had by 1935 replaced Conservative governments with a host of eccentric, unconventional, and reforming premiers, MacKenzie does not really flesh this out.

Canada's Depression-era political history awaits a more perceptive revision. My suggestion is to read *King and Chaos* if necessary, but not necessarily *King and Chaos*.