

BOOK REVIEWS / CRITIQUES DE LIVRES

CANADA'S VOICE: THE PUBLIC LIFE OF JOHN WENDELL HOLMES

ADAM CHAPNICK

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REVIEW BY DUANE BRATT*

It is astonishing that there has never been a book-length biography of John Holmes. Not only was he one of the most influential writers on Canadian foreign policy, but he was a first-rate diplomat with the Department of External Affairs (DEA). If that was not enough, he also led Canada's foremost non-governmental organization in foreign affairs, the Canadian Institute of International Affairs (CIIA), from 1960-1973. Finally, throughout his long career he was a mentor to an entire generation of scholars through his work as a graduate supervisor, writer of reference letters, or teaching colleague. You would think that one of this illustrious list—a “who's who” of the study of Canadian foreign policy that included the likes of Kim Nossal, Dan Middlemiss, Michael Tucker, Doug Ross, Peter Mueller, Fen Hampson, John Kirton, Maureen Appel Molot, Brian Tomlin, Harald von Riekhoff, Lloyd Axworthy, and Denis Stairs—would have taken up the urge to write a comprehensive scholarly biography. Instead, it took one of the rising stars in the study of Canadian foreign policy—Adam Chapnick—to take on the task. The result is a tour de force.

Chapnick uses a chronological approach to trace Holmes's diverse career. The first chapter describes Holmes's upbringing in southwestern Ontario and education at the Universities of Western Ontario, Toronto, and London. This is followed up by an examination of Holmes career (1943-1960) at DEA, where he was best known for his work at the United Nations. It was during his stint in New York that he helped craft Canada's response to the Korean War and was Lester Pearson's right hand man during the Suez Crisis. Holmes would remain an advocate of the United Nations for the rest of his life. Another major accomplishment at DEA, and foreshadowing his academic career, was creating a comprehensive training program for new recruits. After leaving DEA, Holmes was given a safe landing at the CIIA as its new president. Using his vast array of contacts, Holmes was able to attract money (largely from the Carnegie Corporation and Ford Foundation) and high-profile speakers (like Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere) for the CIIA. It was while at the CIIA, that Holmes also began his academic and writing careers. As an academic, Holmes taught international relations at the University of Toronto. As a writer, Holmes developed the concept of Canada as a middle power through his major works such as *The Better Part of Valour* (1970), *Canada: A Middle-Aged Power* (1976), *Life with Uncle* (1981), and *The Shaping of Peace* (1979, 1982). Chapnick successfully argues that it was in his post-DEA

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role of “part practitioner, part scholar, part teacher, part public intellectual” that Holmes made “the greatest public impact on Canada and Canadians more generally” (130 & 125).

Despite the praise, and sometimes awe, with which Chapnick writes about his subject, this is not a hagiography. Chapnick describes how Holmes was pushed out of External Affairs because he was bisexual, in the process, providing evidence of a secret affair with a Soviet man while serving Moscow in the late 1940s. Although Chapnick is quick to point out that “even though there is evidence that Holmes was indeed targeted by the Soviet secret police ... his affair was not with a Soviet agent assigned to discredit him” (113). Holmes inordinate concern with money, not surprisingly for someone who grew up during the depression, was also a theme throughout the book. Finally, there is an interesting anecdote explaining why the CIIA did not move its offices to Ottawa in the 1960s; “a move that would have benefited the Institute in the long term by increasing its access to both the government and to relevant non-governmental organizations there” (188). Simply put, Holmes “was comfortable in Toronto” and did not want to move, thereby putting his personal interests ahead of the organization (186).

This was an extremely well-researched book. In addition, to examining Holmes’s own writing, digging through archives, and consulting the appropriate secondary literature, Chapnick conducted 151 interviews with family members, colleagues, and students.

Canada’s Voice deserves to be read by the general public, and not just an academic audience. In recent years, Canadians have devoured scholarly biographies of Pierre Trudeau and Lester Pearson, and they would do the same for John Holmes. They just need to know about it.
