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Reviewer

Book Review

Searching for W.P.M. Kennedy: The Biography of an Enigma, by Martin L. Friedland

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Review:

Martin L. Friedland, *Searching for W.P.M. Kennedy: The Biography of an Enigma* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020). xvi + 485pp. Cloth \$86.25; Paper \$37.46

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I first encountered the name W.P.M. Kennedy, one of Canada's outstanding constitutional scholars and the first Dean of the University of Toronto's Faculty of Law, while reading through the personal papers of one of Canada's most famous Roman Catholic priests, Fr James J. Tompkins. In 1913, the pesky university administrator and reformer was hell bent on raising the standards of his small diocesan college, St. Francis Xavier University (St. F.X.) in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. On the lookout for emerging young scholars with post-graduate training, when he received word that Kennedy, a Catholic convert and graduate of Trinity College Dublin, was willing to come to Canada to teach history and English literature, he excitedly recruited the thirty-three-year-old scholar to his small college. As a historian of the Antigonish Movement, I was interested in Kennedy because he personified Fr Tompkins' desire to replace the old clerical professors and their theological degrees (in other words, priests of the diocese) with younger and more diverse minds. In this way, Kennedy was, to a small degree, part of the change that would eventually lead St. F.X. to start one of the most important Catholic social movements in Canadian history.

While Kennedy arrived in eastern Nova Scotia with great fanfare, published his book *Parish Life under Queen Elizabeth*, and even started research into the history of Catholicism in Nova Scotia, within months he was gone. Until I read Martin L. Friedland's *Searching for W.P.M. Kennedy: The Biography of an Enigma*, I did not understand why Fr Tompkins' experiment had failed. It turns out that Kennedy had gotten

into a relationship with a student at neighbouring Mount St. Bernard College, Sara Josephine Cameron, who just happened to be the grand niece of the late, and formidable, Bishop John Cameron (he even dedicated Parish Life under Queen Elizabeth to her – "to S.J.C."). Needless to write, such activities in "the little Vatican," were frowned upon and Kennedy was soon on his way out.

While the mystery of Kennedy's hasty disappearance from Antigonish was solved, it was only the beginning of the story of this scholarly enigma. W.P.M. Kennedy was born in Lurgan, Northern Ireland (he would later say England), and the record of his early schooling is murky (he would later claim to have been privately tutored in exotic places like Paris and Berlin). An emerging scholar on Tudor and Elizabethan England, after graduating from Trinity, he wrote a book on the 16th century Anglican prelate, Archbishop Matthew Parker, which brought him "distinction" (31). In 1908, hoping to find employment at a Catholic boy's school, Kennedy converted to Roman Catholicism and then adopted the Christian middle name "Paul," so that W.M. (William McClure) Kennedy became W.P.M. Kennedy.

After the scandal in Antigonish, Kennedy decided to remain in Canada and in 1914 took a teaching post at St. Michael's College in Toronto. Archbishop Neil McNeil, a native of the Diocese of Antigonish, knew about the dalliance with Sara Cameron but hired him anyway (it was no secret that McNeil loathed Bishop Cameron). To make extra money (faculty positions were poorly paid), Kennedy began teaching on the Canadian constitution in the history department at the University of Toronto. According to Friedland, Kennedy's interest in Tudor constitutional history was a natural entry into Canadian constitutional issues" (52).

In 1915, Kennedy married Teresa May Johnson, but tragically she died during the "Spanish" flu epidemic in 1919. Within a year, the budding constitutionalist had married a University of Toronto student, Pauline Simpson (a pattern was emerging), which did not go over well with senior members of his department. Soon, Kennedy, who did not get on with the legendary Professor George Wrong, had moved on to the Department of Political Economy and, despite the drama of his personal life, in 1922 he wrote *The Constitution of Canada: An Introduction to its Development and Law*, which received strong reviews.

Yet, the mysteries continued. In 1923, Florence Amelia Deeks (1864–1959), who later accused the British writer H.G. Wells of plagiarizing her work in his publication *The Outline of History* (the case went all the way to the Privy Council), had paid Kennedy handsomely to edit portions of her manuscript. During the trial, one barrister suggested that Kennedy might have changed Deeks manuscript to read more like Wells's history. Kennedy had also claimed to have been a central figure in drafting the Irish constitution, which annoyed some of his colleagues who had become tired of his boasting. "Indeed," writes Friedland, "he later may have come to believe that he was one of the key figures in drafting the Irish constitution" (110).

Despite this strange personality (once established at the University of Toronto he left the Catholic faith), Kennedy's output was prolific. Having edited an issue of *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, that was devoted to Canada, he went on to contribute to the eight-volume *Cambridge History of the British Empire*. A biography of Lord Elgin was followed by a study of William Lyon MacKenzie, which pleased Prime Minister MacKenzie King and may have led to a Chair in Toronto's Faculty of Politics.

In 1926, Robert MacIver, head of the Department of Political Economy, asked Kennedy to lead a new law program, and by 1937, it had morphed into a separate department. From this position, flowed more publications, such as *Reports of the Laws of Quebec 1767-1770*, studies into the Law of Nationality (citizenship), which were used by Ottawa. Again, however, Kennedy wanted to be so much more, often asking for appointments to international conferences. When he asked Prime Minister MacKenzie King to appoint him as a Canadian representative at the 1930 Hague Conference on nationality and citizenship, King noted that Kennedy had a "weakness for recognition" (184).

Many of the final chapters of the book are dedicated to the narrative of Toronto's Faculty of Law and Kennedy's multidisciplinary approach to its scholarship. Tracking Kennedy's changing views on interpreting the constitution was valuable as were his ever-changing opinions on provincial and federal powers (he believed that Federal taxing and spending power struck the right balance).

Throughout the book, we meet interesting, and well-known personalities like A.H.L. Lefroy, Frank Underhill and Norman "Larry"

MacKenzie. One really gets the sense of how elite post-secondary education was in the early 20th-century, and how influential central Canadian institutions like the University of Toronto were over the national discourse. Formidable Provincial and Federal politicians often had a hand in Chair appointments (Professor George Wrong, for example, was the son-in-law of the politician Edward Blake), and the graduate list from Kennedy's law program is full of recognizable names. Power flowed through Toronto's halls, faculty lounges and alumni meetings.

There is much about W.P.M. Kennedy that is unattractive and Friedland admits that he was a "self-centred domineering egotist" (373). By the end of the book, it was clear that there may have been more to his abrupt departure from Fr James Tompkins' St. F.X. than a love affair with a student. Kennedy enjoyed elite society, fought hard for recognition, lied about credentials (even claiming to be a lawyer) and was not afraid to ask (or beg) for high-profile appointments. After leaving STFX in 1914, he even had the temerity to ask the institution for an honorary doctorate. By that point, St. F.X. was moving to democratize post-secondary education, was shifting toward "People's Schools," and had no interest in fulfilling such presumptuous requests (Kennedy ended up getting the honorary doctorate elsewhere) from Toronto careerists.

I also found his use of religion as a means of obtaining work to be distasteful. Faith for many people is an intensely personal experience and all Christians are within their rights to change denominations or leave the faith altogether. Despite his unwillingness to see a clergyman on his deathbed (his son was an Anglican priest) Kennedy's faith choices always seem strategic.

On the other hand, what attracts me to W.P.M. Kennedy is his curiosity and great productivity. In an era when many young, specialized scholars produce their 'book' and then fade into their well-paid teaching positions, Kennedy's productivity and range of scholarship was impressive. His publishing record (books, articles, reports, et cetera) and editing prowess would put even our finest Canada Research Chairs to shame. It seems clear that he often overcharged for some research assignments (like the work for the Rowell-Sirois commission), but his outputs were nonetheless thorough and useful.

It is clear that Friedland, a professor emeritus in Toronto's Faculty of Law, admires and respects his subject (he even owns the old Kennedy

Family cottage), but that does not stop him from being critical. The book is skillfully written and very accessible. In fact, it is a real page turner in places, and the accounts of Friedland's research are often as interesting as the details he unearthed. The book is packed with information and the author might have made better use of the notes in places as some of the backstories were a little distracting (as examples, the history of law at Toronto, and the long accounts of the personalities of Kennedy's children). These are, however, minor quibbles for a wonderful and in-depth biography of an important Canadian scholar and an even more fascinating character.

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Dr. Peter Ludlow is the President-General of the Canadian Catholic Historical Association, and Editor of CCHA Historical Studies. His latest book, *Disciples of Antigonish: Catholics in Nova Scotia 1880-1960*, will be published by McGill-Queen's University Press in the spring of 2022.