

## BOOK REVIEW

### NIGHT OF THE KNIVES: A POST MORTEM

We have felt, from the first astonishing publicity puffs in the *Fredericton Gleaner*, that only rational response to the *Night of the Knives* and to the “controversy” which the *Gleaner* has been trying to generate, was to ignore it. But the pressure of publicity from the *Gleaner* and from some other Atlantic newspapers has been unbelievable. Almost every day since a week before its publication by the *Gleaner*’s Brunswick Press division, the book has been front page “news.” Even the *Gleaner*’s own editorials make the front page, as reports on them are sent out on the CP wire, come back, and are printed as news.

In the face of this unprecedented puffery, a problem presents itself. Most people have not and will not read the book, in spite of the *Gleaner* attempts to give it “best selling” status, and might get the impression that the book has in fact generated widespread controversy or be tempted to think of it as having real importance.

It is for those people that the following review is published.

Between the first and the twenty-first of October, the *Gleaner* has given 135 column inches of text and pictures on the front page to *Night of the Knives*. In that same period, 110 front-page inches have been devoted to news and pictures of political events and social issues in the Atlantic provinces.

It may once have been true, as Robert Coates argues in *Night of the Knives*, that the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada was infamous for the wanton destruction of its leaders in times of adversity, but it is more likely now that it is infamous for execrable prose and political naiveté. Mr. Coates has seen to that himself. It is quite impossible to convey the ineptitude with which the book is written. Reading it is the only way to comprehend fully the appalling prose style. Tired, sway-backed phrases lumber to the starting gate like old milk cows pretending to be race horses, and are heartlessly abandoned there while the sentence collapses around them suffocatingly like a plastic cleaner’s bag. For instance, “Brave words were commonplace in his speeches leading to his re-election concerning his handling of Mr. Diefenbaker.” Or: “The type of publicity that flowed from the second weekend of policy discussions produced a far different brand of publicity.”

This sort of thing may be due simply to carelessness or lack of thought. Certainly the forest of simple grammatical errors, typographic slips, inconsistencies and contradictions are indicative of the general slovenliness with which the book was put together. A more serious result of that general sloppiness is the book’s use of clichés and generalities in place of facts.

But without any doubt the most astonishing fact about the book is the naiveté of its author – or the pose of naiveté he assumes; it is hard to be sure which is the case. It is, one would imagine, pretty obvious to any practicing politician that the game of politics is a game of power, and the most common activity is the attempt to gain power. That Dalton Camp attempted to gain power – and succeeded – may be morally reprehensible, but I cannot imagine a politician who did not attempt to gain power. But Mr. Coates, unable to believe or understand political reality, refers repeatedly and tediously to the act of replacing one political leader with another as “assassination.” Now metaphorically, I suppose we could use “assassination” to refer to some unanswered and unanswerable stabbing-in-the-back (though, in a world where real assassinations do take place, it seems a bit hysterical).

But by any realistic standards the sort of campaign mounted by Dalton Camp and the PC Mafia would

have to be described as open aggression. One might as well claim that Pierre Trudeau “assassinated” Robert Stanfield in the last election. It has been known at least since Machiavelli – and practiced a lot longer than that – that a politician who cannot hold on to power is like a prize fighter with a “glass jaw.” He doesn’t expect the audience to cry “foul” if his opponent hits him too hard.

Part of that naiveté, and the most amusing aspect, of the book, is Coates’ near-psychopathic double standard of political morality. What is done to Diefenbaker is slimy and treacherous and violent and despicable; the same thing done to others is praiseworthy, amusing, courageous. For example, the most striking thing about his narrative of the events of November 14, 1966 (intended to be the climax of the book, Chapter V attains an almost palpable tedium) is that double standard. The starched-shirt, fat-jowls-trembling shock with which he asserts that Diefenbaker was heckled by young rowdies contrasts violently with the complacent smugness with which, a few dozen words later, he reports the things that were shouted at Camp during the same meeting. And it seems perfectly clear that he does not notice the contradiction, wouldn’t, probably, admit it as a contradiction if it were pointed out. Reality is a crutch Mr. Coates scorns. Professing shock about a politician getting rid of another in one case, he is quite happy with James Johnston’s firing of Flora MacDonald in order to take over the national directorship of the party. A night of knives? A dark day in 1965? Of course not. Don’t be silly. That’s the way politics are. Or that’s the way they are if you’re getting rid of Miss MacDonald; doing the same thing to John Diefenbaker is assassination.

But even more fun than that is this. Suppose the meeting was packed and Diefenbaker was unfairly shouted down. Coates calls this “violence,” smugly quoting Winston Churchill on the folly of “organized and calculated violence.” Now I suppose if you’re going to throw words like “assassin” around you might as well not worry about precisely what violence means. This may be silly, but it’s not psychopathic. What is close to psychopathic, I think, in its inability to perceive reality, is the fact that three pages later Coates gleefully points out that Camp was forced to “protect his person with bodyguards but some of his followers were not so lucky” and gives us a description of a student who, having shouted an insult at Diefenbaker, “lifted off his feet by a blow to the chin, was flat on his back on the marble floor. Standing over him, fondling a set of skinned knuckles, was Mr. Muir, a former coal miner and still hard of muscle.” One imagines that Coates must actually believe that, directed at Camp and his followers, this is acceptable political behaviour, while heckling of John Diefenbaker is “organized and calculated violence.”

One of the effects of the combination of uncontrolled prose and imperceptiveness is that we find out a lot of things about the author. Or, rather, we find the book suggests things about him. It suggests, for instance, that he believes that men act evilly for no more reason than that they love evil and hate virtue and innocence. Thus there is never the slightest exploration of the motives of Dalton Camp and the Tory Mafia; like characters in some medieval allegory, the only motivation they need is the existence of purity and virtue. Why, for instance, do they want to get rid of Diefenbaker? Not, of course, to save the party, to change policies, to reorganize – not even, apparently, to gain power themselves. This is the sort of analysis he offers: “the inability of the non-elective wing to erode the obvious loyalty John Diefenbaker enjoyed from caucus seemed to produce in them an almost psychopathic determination to destroy him.”

The book also suggests that Coates believes that the only test of political virtue is the ability to win elections. The worst thing he can say about his enemies seems to be that they have “everything but the required formula for election at the polls.” Everything, I would imagine, includes virtue, integrity, ability, intelligence; the formula . . . well, the South Vietnamese government appears to have one.

He appears to believe also that the only test of truth is whether it appeared in the papers; throughout, he offers newspaper accounts as evidence for events to which he was an eyewitness, as though, like the *Gleaner* itself, he couldn't believe it till it came in on the CP wire.

One would like to be able – as Coates does – to bewail the internecine bloodletting in the Progressive Conservative Party. It would be nice, but it would be overstating the case. This is a pillowfight. It isn't that Coates lacks malice, it's that he enters the fray totally unarmed. He hasn't the artillery to hurt even Dalton Camp. And Camp knows it, as his comments about its “awesome insignificance” indicate. If one weren't afraid of offending the Irish, one could quote Dryden:

With whatever gall thou set'st thyself to write,  
Thy inoffensive satires never bite.  
In thy felonious heart though venom lies,  
It does but touch thy Irish pen, and dies