Review of Asa McKercher's *Camelot and Canada*

This is part of an ongoing series of reviews written by Temple graduate students of new books considering the study of force, diplomacy, and international history. These reviews will be posted on an ongoing basis throughout the year. The books you'll see reviewed here are brand new -- they often haven't made it into the pages of major scholarly journals yet, allowing our reviewers to get their say in before the dust has settled. If you would like to participate as a reviewer, or have a book to suggest, please contact Brian McNamara, CENFAD's Thomas J. Davis Fellow, at brian.mcnamara@temple.edu.

Click here for an interview with author Asa McKercher.


Reviewed by: Brian McNamara, PhD Student, Department of History

In *Camelot and Canada*, historian Asa McKercher offers readers a significant and compelling revision of the history of the Canadian-American relationship under President John F. Kennedy. Frustration and negative memories characterize the existing Canadian historiography on this period. Scholars emphasize accounts of the United States failing to adequately consult Canada during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Kennedy's carelessly-discarded notes for the first meeting between himself and Canadian Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, which Diefenbaker found after the meeting, encouraged Kennedy to “PUSH” the Canadian P.M. on several issues, angered Diefenbaker, and have since gotten many Canadian historians’ backs up. The general story is this: Kennedy, the flashy, younger leader cared little for the stodgy Diefenbaker, or for Canada, the United States' proximate, dependable ally. Not so, cautions McKercher. Calling for more “nuance” in the history of this period, he asserts, “Canada did matter to the Kennedy Administration, even if it was simply one of many old allies.” (16) Instead, McKercher argues, “that relations between Camelot and Canada took a turn for the worse is a result of action -- or frequently, inaction -- taken in the Canadian capitol, not in Washington.” (18) To make this case, McKercher interrogates questions of Canadian nationalism, and broadens the scope of his work to examine the daily practicalities of maintaining a diplomatic relationship between allies during a period of “intense friction.” (2)

In McKercher’s view, the relationship between the United States and Canada continued to hum along throughout much of the Kennedy era despite tension because of the ‘quiet diplomacy’ of officials below the top tier of government. McKercher foregrounds actors like Canadian Ambassador Arnold Heeney and American Ambassador Livingston Merchant, as well as officials like Donald Fleming and George Ball. To make his case, McKercher employs an impressive array of archival materials from both sides, which nicely complement his deep knowledge of Canadian and American historiography on this period. In focusing on individuals like Merchant and Fleming, McKercher downplays the importance of personality in the conduct of diplomacy, or at the very least suggests that an antagonistic relationship between two foreign leaders does not have to scuttle their respective nations' diplomatic ties. For instance, in McKercher’s
chapter on the Cuban Missile Crisis, he notes that while Diefenbaker equivocated publicly over the appropriate Canadian response, Secretary of State for External Affairs Howard Green and Minister of National Defense Douglas Harkness kept the gears turning behind the scenes, leading to praise from the U.S. government, and former presidents Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower. “Quiet diplomacy,” then, “had soothed the differences between Ottawa and Washington.” (175) McKercher’s expansion of diplomacy beyond the fractious relationship between Kennedy and Diefenbaker thus allows him to present to readers a clearer picture of the back-and-forth between their two governments.

Nevertheless, McKercher does concur with the established historical wisdom that relations between the North American allies became more fraught in the early 1960s. The reason for this, he suggests, was the influence of nationalism on Canadian foreign policy, and specifically on Diefenbaker. The crucially important argument that McKercher makes, however, is to distinguish between Canadian nationalism and anti-Americanism as drivers of policy. Canadian nationalism, McKercher argues, was generally “an argument for a neutral foreign policy.” (13) It notably did not mean an anti-American foreign policy, but during the tense years of the Cold War, this could often seem the case, were it not for the cautious actions of McKercher’s quiet diplomats. In *Camelot and Canada*, McKercher gives us a view of the United States as largely acquiescent in the effects of Canadian nationalism, but this patience could wear thin. For McKercher, the signal issue between the two nations was nuclear defense. For a time, the United States accepted that Canadian domestic priorities could stall that country’s contribution to nuclear defence and acceptance of BOMARC nuclear missiles – a commitment that the U.S. government had understood its ally would make. But only for a time. “On major questions affecting national security,” McKercher writes, “there was far less goodwill for Canada.” (112)

Coincident with the issues over nuclear defense was Canada’s rejection of Kennedy’s “Grand Design” for closer economic ties to Western Europe, out of fear that it would affect the Commonwealth Preference System. This system likely would have aligned Canada and the United States even closer economically, but “nationalism precluded support for Kennedy’s economic program.” (146) As the debates over the Grand Design and the BOMARC missiles wore on, the ground under Diefenbaker’s feet shifted. His government fell to a minority leadership after the 1962 election, and faced a continued challenge from Lester B. Pearson’s Liberals, a party that was willing to accept the nuclear warheads over which Diefenbaker and the Conservatives vacillated. In order to differentiate himself from his opponents, and owing to his frustrations with his American allies, Diefenbaker ultimately leaned toward an anti-Americanist bent in his expression of nationalism, rejecting the BOMARC missiles, causing members of his cabinet to resign, and prompting the 1963 election that would lead to his downfall. “It was this sense of nationalism,” McKercher writes “that had seemed to frustrate the smooth conduct of Canada-US relations under Diefenbaker.” (206) It is McKercher’s distinction between nationalism and anti-Americanism, and his detailed description of the diplomatic process which allows him to make this argument persuasive. Despite the many positive aspects of *Camelot and Canada*, there are some areas that could have been refined. While McKercher historicizes nationalism and anti-Americanism in a detailed manner, other terms – like ‘quiet diplomacy’ – are more nebulous in their definition. Astute readers will discern the
author’s meaning as the story unfolds, but clarity from the start would have been welcome. In addition, the diplomats who populate Camelot and Canada seem largely sealed off from the wider world around them. Understanding these individuals in the broader social context of 1960s Canada – in which nationalism and anti-Americanism were major paradigms, but certainly not the only ones – would make McKercher’s analysis richer. There is little analysis of whether or not the views of government figures aligned with the broader Canadian public. It is difficult as a reviewer, however, to pull too hard on this thread, as McKercher himself acknowledges that he set out to write a book focused on “the sheltered world in which policymakers and diplomatists practiced their craft.” (4) Indeed this is precisely the book he has written. Camelot and Canada is cogently argued and impeccably researched. It offers a substantial – and persuasive – revision of Canadian-American relations in the early 1960s.