
REVIEWS**Suave Puritan: A Comprehensive
Biography of Lorne Pierce**

Sandra Campbell, *Both Hands: A Life of Lorne Pierce of Ryerson Press*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013. xviii + 644 pp.

For forty years, Lorne Pierce was the face of Ryerson Press during the period when it was Canada's foremost publisher of Canadian literature. His brilliance and moral commitment prompted even bad boy Irving Layton, while furious that Pierce would not publish his bawdy poetry, to call him "the 'suavest puritan' that ever breathed outside of Milton" (426) and earned Desmond Pacey's commendation as "a great editor and a great Canadian" (503). As Sandra Campbell points out in her introduction to *Both Hands: A Life of Lorne Pierce of Ryerson Press*, there are relatively few studies of the history of the Canadian publishing industry, and even fewer of the handful of influential figures such as Pierce—along with John McClelland of M & S, Hugh Eayrs of Macmillan, and a few others—who left their imprint on Canadian culture during its formative years. Pierce's life story thus deserves to be told, and Campbell's detailed, copiously researched biography provides a comprehensive portrait of the man and his contribution to Canadian culture.

Pierce was both an extraordinary individual—unusually capable, dedicated, and indefatigable, with high ideals and a shining vision for Canada—and also in many ways an exemplar of his times. Born in a small eastern Ontario farming community, he was raised by a devoutly Methodist mother whose convictions about moral service led him, at a young age, to feel himself destined (not always happily) for the ministry in order to serve God and country. His educational experience, first at Queen's University and then at the Union Theological College in New York City, and his encounters with the extreme poverty and bleak immigrant realities of the prairie west as a teacher and Methodist probationer, fired him with conviction that the Church must become a force for cultural consolidation and social amelioration in the young country.

As a student preacher, he distinguished himself not only by his rhetorical ability, intelligence, and commitment to the people in his charge (often at great personal cost—as would be the case throughout his life when hard work imperiled his always precarious health) but also by his social con-

cerns and skeptical stance towards Methodist doctrines of personal salvation and Hell. The Social Gospel, with its emphasis on social reform over evangelizing (a secularizing focus that would ultimately be the undoing of the mainline churches in Canada) caught his moral imagination at this time, and led him to reject what he saw as the over-emotionalism and excessive strictness of his mother's faith, though not the call to serve.

After ordination in the Methodist Church and marriage to Edith Chown, niece of the radical socialist-feminist Alice Chown, Pierce volunteered to fight in the Great War, and was placed in a leadership capacity at Ongwanada Military Hospital in Kingston. He was ultimately prevented from going overseas by a TB diagnosis. His awareness of Canadian sacrifice during the conflict—his best friend died at Vimy Ridge—marked him forever. At the conclusion of the war, while working in a rural parish in Dundas County (not the foreign mission post he had once pursued), he made a name for himself as an effective organizer and superb communicator. Ultimately, his sterling reputation brought him to the attention of the Book Committee of the Methodist Book and Publishing House, which had just created the Ryerson Press as a trade book publisher of Canadian literature. Pierce was hired at age 30 to lead it.

From the first, Pierce aspired to use his position to shape Canadian culture broadly and to have the kind of nation-making impact that had always been his dream: to promote a moral literature that would be the lifeblood of the young nation. To this end, he threw himself into multiple roles at the House, working not only as the general editor of the new imprint but also as columnist for the *Christian Guardian*, hands-on copyeditor of new titles, prominent critic of Canadian literature, and leading spokesperson for cultural nationalism. He devoted himself to attracting and shepherding new authors into print, editing anthologies of Canadian literature, writing critical articles and works of literary history and literary biography, taking risks with controversial novels such as Frederick Philip Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh* (1925), publishing a poetry chapbook series, overseeing various school textbook projects, and supporting both the serious appreciation of Canadian art (especially that of C. W. Jefferys and the Group of Seven) and the scholarly study of Canadian history.

Also from the first, he had to overcome significant physical challenges, including near-total deafness that soon made it impossible for him to speak on the telephone or listen reliably to group conversations, and systemic lupus, an auto-immune disease that made him vulnerable to respiratory infections, painful arthritis (by the late 1940s, he was unable to write with his right hand), inflammation of the skin, flu-like illnesses, cardiac disease,

and periodic breakdowns from exhaustion. His desire to be a benefactor to Canadian literature (he established the Lorne Pierce Medal, committing himself and his heirs (!) to paying the cost of striking the medal every year) brought him to the brink of financial ruin and marital collapse. Money shortages at the Press were an almost constant worry, leading, for example, to the cancelling of his ambitious bi-cultural *Makers of Canadian Literature* series. For the first decade of his employment, tensions often erupted between Pierce and the two Book Stewards who oversaw his position.

Through it all, he persevered mightily, and though a younger generation of writers and artists would come to view him as stodgy and conventional, and although his aversion to sexual frankness and crude language arguably constrained some of his authors, such as Laura Goodman Salverson, and led others like Earle Birney and Irving Layton to publish elsewhere, he was responsible for a number of important publishing firsts at Ryerson. These included an entire school text series focused on Canadian content, important new titles by Archibald Lampman and Duncan Campbell Scott, the first Canadian edition of *Anne of Green Gables* (a major *coup*), modernist poets E.J. Pratt, A.M. Klein, Anne Marriott, Miriam Waddington, Al Purdy, Dorothy Livesay, P.K. Page, Louis Dudek, and Patrick Anderson, among others, and the critics and editors E.K. Brown, Desmond Pacey, John Sutherland, Northrop Frye, and Malcolm Ross, many of whom would carry on the task of shaping the Canadian canon after Pierce's retirement.

Campbell chronicles Pierce's life and work in convincing detail, and the result is a rich history of the challenges and achievements of Canadian publishing during the period of his Ryerson tenure. It is a very good read. The thrust of Campbell's argument is that Pierce deserves more credit than he has thus far been given for nurturing Canada's literary culture and preparing the way for the Centennial boom years, especially perhaps for extensively publishing Canadian modernists despite his personal discomfort with their style and vision, which he found excessively jaundiced and disrespectful, and for advocating freedom of expression and high standards for Canadian criticism and cultural analysis. The modernist caricature of him as a prudish reactionary and United Church censor has unfortunately obscured general awareness of his keen independent judgement and willingness to promote difficult and anti-establishment authors such as Harold Innis and Vera Lysenko, whose refusal to condemn Communism caused a scandal when Pierce published her history of Ukrainian immigration to Canada. His consistent desire to strengthen Canadians' knowledge of their own history led to many important cultural initiatives. He was a patron of Canadian art and letters who strove to rehabilitate the reputations of an ear-

lier generation of poets whose stars had set, especially the reputation of Bliss Carman (through dubious abridgement of his work—a fascinating part of the book). The degree to which he sacrificed his personal life to bring his various publishing dreams to fruition testifies to outstanding commitment.

Campbell states early on that what makes a biography of Pierce both possible and daunting is the sheer volume of extant material, much of it collected and donated by Pierce himself, in the form of diaries, correspondence, manuscripts, photographs, scrapbooks, and many other documents. As she phrases it, “[t]he biography of a pack-rat workaholic publisher with a finger in every Canadian cultural pie over four decades is a challenge to research and write” (11). Campbell has certainly met the challenge. Her mastery of the material and scrupulous analysis of Pierce’s years with the Press have produced an extremely valuable picture of the institutional constraints, practical parameters, economic challenges, herculean effort, and personal tensions (with prickly writers and jealous co-workers) of Pierce’s various publishing projects. The book is superbly well organized and clearly written, a praiseworthy feat of selection and assembly. Given the extensive Pierce archive, my only regret is that there are so few photographs throughout the book and also comparatively few quotations from Pierce’s correspondence and journals, perhaps out of a desire to avoid making a long biography even longer. The result, unfortunately, is that the personal Pierce—both his physical presence and his written voice—is muted; in a book about a man so frequently remembered and praised for his character and vision, one misses the opportunity to become more intimately acquainted with him. But a biography cannot do everything, and what Campbell has done very well indeed is to give us an illuminating portrait of who Pierce was as publisher, editor, author, and critic—as a doyen of Canadian literature.

A few of Campbell’s judgements about Pierce invite quibbles—though not damning ones. For example, Campbell is convinced that Pierce’s attitude to women writers was always coloured by “issues of gender” (470). That Pierce’s views of women were typical of his age is not perhaps to be wondered at, but evidence for a thoroughgoing bias against them as writers, especially considering his frequent promotion of female authors, seems slight. How is Campbell so sure that what she views as gender bias was not simply an objective appraisal of the writer’s strengths and weaknesses? That Pierce wrote a critical biography of Marjorie Pickthall characterizing her verse as “miraculous” and the woman herself as pure and sweet hardly seems to merit Campbell’s conclusion that Pierce “dis-

counted” (239) her achievement by deeming it “unaccountable in terms of who and what she was” (239). Pierce’s passing over of “anger, depression, or grief” (240) in the biography—brought forward by Campbell as evidence of dehumanizing patriarchal idealization—may just as well be explained by the pressure put on Pierce by Pickthall’s friend Helena Coleman to use “restraint and delicacy” (238) when discussing the writer’s personal life. When Campbell notes of the treatment of Dorothy Livesay that her career was judged “in terms of gender stereotypes,” she can offer nothing more convincing than that Desmond Pacey, commissioned by Pierce to write an appraisal, attributed Livesay’s renewed emphasis on “personal emotions and on natural description” in part to “her marriage and domestic responsibilities” (471). It is hard to feel that a strong case for critical sexism has been made.

Also too neatly in lock-step with contemporary preoccupations are disapproving comments about the “homogenizing” (133) impulse in Pierce’s cultural nationalism. As Campbell reiterates in her conclusion, Pierce’s view of Canada was “essentially white, middle class, male and WASP, albeit with bows to the French fact in Canada and western Canadian ethnic diversity” (499). It is a point unnecessarily insisted upon nearly every time Pierce’s nationalism is mentioned. Earlier, Campbell emphasizes that Pierce’s conception of Canadian “national ideals” was intended “to infuse immigrants with the existing values of Canadians, not vice versa” (133). It would be a bizarre nationalism that preferred other people’s values to one’s own. A little later, she writes disparagingly of Pierce’s belief that public school education should “acculturate the children of newcomers to a white, middle-class, Christian construct of Canada framed in terms of French-English entente and British forms of government” (301). Whether or not the belief that immigrants should integrate into Canadian society is now rightly considered racist, the biographer’s emphasis on Pierce’s presumed failing suggests a conviction of moral superiority not so unlike the Puritanism with which Pierce struggled at Ryerson Press.

I mention these points not because a biographer needs to approve of her subject to write a convincing biography—and this *is* a convincing, highly useful biography—but because the biographer should not allow her ideological assumptions, as historically-conditioned and culturally-infllected as the subject’s own, to unduly influence her treatment. These few instances of presentism stand out precisely because Campbell is generally so much in sympathy (if not necessarily in agreement) with Pierce, obviously engaged by his critical acumen, enormous capacity for hard work, and zealous commitment to his country’s artists. In the main, Sandra Campbell

does more than justice to Pierce's human complexity, with the result that her Pierce-like labours have produced a significant work of biography that will greatly benefit all students and friends of Canadian history and publishing.

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