
At the Heart of Gold: The Yukon Commissioner's Office 1898-2010, by Linda Johnson, *The Legislative Assembly of Yukon*, 2012

One of Canada's smallest jurisdictions, Yukon is also one of the most active in the promotion of its legislative history which, like the Territory itself, has been long and colourful. Linda Johnson was Yukon Archivist for 20 years, and later College Archivist at Yukon College. She is author of *With the People Who Live Here: The History of the Yukon Legislature, 1909 – 1961*, published in 2009.

This book is about the men and women who have held office as Yukon Commissioner since 1898. As present Commissioner Doug Phillips notes "The term Commissioner could refer to anything from a guard at the Parliament Building to the head of the RCMP to any number of positions in between." (p. 315). The Office has evolved over the years and is now similar to the office of Lieutenant Governor in a province.

The first part of the book consists of a series of mini biographies of 15 Commissioners from 1898 to 1962. Many were closely aligned with the Liberal or Conservative Party, depending on who was in office in Ottawa. Most were transplants from the southern provinces but all fell under the "Spell of the Yukon". A few went on to federal politics like George Black (1912-1918)

who later served as a member of Parliament and Speaker of the House of Commons in the 1930s. James Ross (1901-1902) became an MP and then a Senator. In the process of learning about their lives the reader becomes familiar with all the great themes of Yukon history from the Gold Rush to mining to pipelines to aboriginal land claims.

The second part of the book focuses on the men and women who served as Commissioner since 1962. They are a more diverse lot including the first woman, Ione Christensen, and the first Aboriginal, Judy Gingrell. At the time this book was started, all the Commissioners appointed since 1962 were still alive and nine of them were interviewed. The biographies are edited extracts from these interviews. These oral histories are refreshingly frank as many Commissioners do not hesitate to recount their failures and shortcomings as well as their successes.

Each oral history covers more or less the same ground with information about their early lives, family lives and, of course their years in office. This format makes interesting reading but the problem with oral history becomes clear when we look at the issue of achieving responsible government.

The struggle for responsible government, whereby the Commissioner went from being the head of government to a

ceremonial figure was a struggle as was the case much earlier in Upper and Lower Canada. No blood was shed in Yukon but between 1978 and 1980 there were four Commissioners (Arthur Pearson, Frank Fingland, Ione Christensen and Doug Bell) two resignations and a flurry of charges and counter charges as elected assemblymen clashed with appointed Commissioners for control of the Territory. The situation was further complicated by two change in governments in Ottawa so that there were half a dozen Ministers of Northern and Indian Affairs during this three year period.

Each Commissioner discusses the move to responsible government but each has his or her own perspective on how it happened and who deserves the credit or blame. It is difficult for the uninformed reader to separate fact from opinion. The definitive history of responsible government in the Yukon remains to be written.

Despite this problem the collection of Yukon stories is a valuable addition to the literature on the Canadian north. Several generations of Commissioners, Speakers and Clerks deserve credit for supporting the oral history project and seeing it used for this valuable and entertaining publishing project.

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