

Was William Lyon Mackenzie King weird about his mother? Not necessarily, Charlotte Gray finds

REVIEWED BY DEBORAH GORHAM

Mrs. King: The Life and Times of Isabel Mackenzie King
By Charlotte Gray
Viking; 352 pages; \$32.95

ISABEL GRACE MACKENZIE KING, the subject of this informative and engaging book, was the daughter of radical reformer William Lyon Mackenzie and the mother of William Lyon Mackenzie King, Canada's longest serving prime minister.

Although Isabel Mackenzie King did not participate directly in public life, she has figured prominently in folklore and in scholarship on Mackenzie King: possibly, more Canadians know that King believed he could commune with his mother beyond the grave than know about his political career.

King proclaimed his love for his mother, but his expressions of filial devotion were not unusual for a man raised in the Victorian era nor were they always seen as odd.

R.M. Dawson, who wrote the first volume of the official life of the prime minister in 1958 portrays King's mother very positively. H. Blair Neatby, who wrote Volumes 2 and 3, is concerned with King's public life, but he does make a few references to King's relationship with his mother in Volume 3, and in those remarks he is more skeptical than Dawson.

Neatby's third volume was published in 1976, the same year in which C. P. Stacey's *A Very Double Life: The Private World of Mackenzie King* appeared. Stacey's themes include King's furtive sexuality, his belief in spiritualism and the unhealthy nature of his relationship to his mother. Joy Esberoy's psychobiography *Knight of the Holy Spirit*, (1980) went even further. For Esberoy, Isabel King was "a bitter, sometimes malicious woman, self-centered and possessive."

Given this background of King family lore, one purpose of Gray's book, inevitably, is to re-examine this mother-son relationship. But its great strength is to go beyond this question. Gray has used the voluminous King family papers to construct a perceptive study of middle-class family life in 19th-century English Canada. *Mrs. King* is an intergenerational narrative in which the Mackenzie and King families illustrate intimate relationships between parents, siblings and extended kin networks; Victorian perceptions of femininity

and masculinity; hierarchies of status in the private as well as the public sphere and the influence of ethnicity and religion (in this case Scottishness and Presbyterianism).

Gray sensitively evokes Isabel's parents, William Lyon Mackenzie and his wife Isabel Baxter. Gray presents her mother as a strong, intelligent woman of deep religious conviction. She was steady where Mackenzie himself was unstable, and had a strength of character that enabled her to endure the poverty and exile after the rebellion of 1837, and the family's struggles with illness and debt after their return to Toronto in 1850, especially after Mackenzie's death in 1861.

In her account of the family and its difficulties, Gray focuses on the fate of Isabel and her sisters. One had made a successful marriage before her father's death, but the other three were left with few resources. Money was scarce, and their social circle had contracted. As Gray presents it, a good marriage was their only avenue to security.

Isabel Grace, who was attractive and self-confident, did achieve what appeared to be a good match when in 1872 she married John King, a promising young lawyer.

Most of Gray's book is concerned with the family created by John and Isabel King. Despite some success, the King family experienced a pervasive if unacknowledged unhappiness. Both Isabel and John were deeply disappointed because John failed to achieve the wealth and the public status to which they both aspired. The Kings intended to move in Toronto's best circles, and to some extent they did, but they were always short of

money and were therefore forced to practice the concealments and deceptions that were part of the experience of the "shabby genteel."

Gray provides a full analysis of the struggles and dilemmas of each of the four children of the King marriage but she is most concerned with and sympathetic to the plight of the two daughters, Bella and Janet, who suffered the full impact of the problems of the debt-ridden household. Janet finally did escape the household by marrying. Bella, who never married and died relatively young, had ambitions to train as a nurse, but, as Gray demonstrates, she was not able to carry them through.

The family member Gray likes least is William Lyon Mackenzie King himself. While she acknowledges his talent she sees him as the priggish, censorious bully of the family. She believes that the love between Isabel and her famous son was to some extent genuine, but that each deceived themselves and each other. Isabel, Gray believes, had the excuse of emotional and material neediness. It was "Willie" who indulged in egregious mythologizing

and dishonesty. For instance, as Gray shows, King was not able to squarely face his mother's last illness.

While this book is written for the general reader rather than as a piece of academic scholarship, it is a serious work based on extensive reading of the Mackenzie King papers and a good knowledge of the relevant historiography.

Gray's major theme throughout is that the energy and ambitions of the women in her story were constrained and misdirected because of the limited roles available to Victorian middle-class women.

She overstates this theme — the fact that the 19th-century women's movement articulating the existence of these constraints is evidence itself that Victorian notions of femininity were being chal-

lenged — but in the case of the King family, Gray convincingly establishes that both its women and its men were unable to shed the assumptions that arose from their social status and that were imbedded in their religious and cultural beliefs.

Readers of this book will learn not only about Isabel King and her famous son, but about the milieu in which they lived. Gray's style is lively and readable and filled with evocative detail. *Mrs. King* deserves a wide readership.

Deborah Gorham is a history professor at Carleton University, who does research on British and Canadian women's history. Her most recent book is Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).



The young Mackenzie King already on his high horse.

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