

# Mrs. King's times

A clearly dysfunctional family reveals the panoply of life in Victorian Canada

**Mrs. King:  
The Life And Times Of Isabel  
Mackenzie King**

BY CHARLOTTE GRAY  
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BY ROGER HALL

In the great sweep of history Isabel King (1843-1917) was a marginal person — suspended between the two powerful figures that were her rebel father, William Lyon Mackenzie, and her striving, outwardly successful son, William Lyon Mackenzie King. Inevitably, our interest in her is because of them, particularly young Willie, her bizarre, talented, manipulative and devoted boy who remains Canada's longest-serving, and according to some, most capable, prime minister. This book would be a great success if all it did were to throw more light on the motivations behind that strange, brooding character.

But it does much more. Charlotte Gray builds Mrs. King into a figure of flesh and blood, and uses her and her clearly dysfunctional family as a lens to reveal the full panoply of life in Victorian Canada, particularly at the key point where the nascent nation awkwardly straddled the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

It is not a flattering portrait, either of the self-centred, occasionally quite odious Mrs. King or the cosseted, circumscribed and derivative colonial world that she inhabited. Skilfully written and generally well-re-

searched, *Mrs. King* is a convincing and vigorous social history focusing on high Anglo-Ontario at the height of its Imperial pretentiousness.

What makes the story so interesting is the perspective. Isabel Mackenzie King, all her life, both embraced and rejected her father's notoriety. A product of his later life, in fact, she scarcely knew him well, drawing her deeper strengths, which might uncharitably be called stubbornness, more from her ubiquitous mother, the resilient, devoted and determined Isabel Baxter.

But whereas the elder Mackenzies — man and wife — had striven, however uncertainly and ineffectively, to improve the lot of their fellows through political reform, Isabel the daughter longed for that grand Victorian shibboleth: respectability. She sought it first in her 1872 marriage to John King, whom she thought destined to be a rich and influential lawyer. When he failed on his own initiative, she pushed him, using her not inconsiderable beauty, talents and social graces in a generally fruitless effort to make a niche in Toronto's stifling society that might lead to more temporal rewards.

Finally, shamelessly, she succeeded in gaining her financial and social needs through her son, whose fierce strength of will and ability to dazzle and succeed rivalled her own. They were perfect, devoted partners whose ambitions and immense sentimentality complimented one another — most frequently to the detriment of her other children. When she finally died,

Willie idealized her image even more, seeking her approval through spiritualism, and all the while, as Gray writes, pretending that "his ambition was a selfless tribute to her."

All this is told with great clarity and ability by Charlotte Gray, who has made much use of the vast King diaries and other personal papers, but who also has a keen eye for contemporary historical detail and convincing backdrop.

Particularly captivating is the large selection of photographs — both formal portraits and candid shots, showing the King family and their various connections. There are a few slips which the academic reviewers will catch, mostly chronological and geographic, but generally the research is sound and reliable. Certainly, the feel is right: this is a tale told not from the vice-regal glitter of Rideau Hall, or from the bootstraps of Toronto's ward, but from the stilted perspective of "shabby gentility," the gritty, determined, grasping and ultimately selfish perspective of the striving middle class from which most of us trace our roots.

Lastly, a confession. I know the author, in fact would count her a friend. Further, when she set about her task, I suggested a couple of sources and she duly thanks me in the preface. Should I have agreed to review the book? I knew that Charlotte's shrewdness and experience about political matters couldn't fail to produce as many insights into the political world of our past as she regularly achieves in her journalism about contemporary Ottawa. Reputation, as Mrs. King would appreciate, counts for a great deal.

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