



Isabel in 1885:  
her ambitions were  
reined in by  
Victorian society

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er is already well-known. His diaries, published in 1976, reveal how he made a virtual saint of Isabel after her death in 1917: he kept a candle burning under her portrait and consulted her spirit in séances, sometimes on matters of national importance. What Gray adds to this picture is a sense of their daily working symbiosis within the context of the entire King family. Most biographies tend to falsify their subjects a little by placing them in a spotlight that reduces everyone else to walk-on parts. But while *Mrs. King* says a great deal about Isabel, it also devotes attention to her husband, John King, and her four children. The result is a memorable, gracefully composed picture of a late-Victorian, middle-class Canadian family, with all its neuroses and hopes laid bare.

One of the central themes of the book concerns the era's genteel repression of women. Isabel was intelligent and energetic, but the only "career" that lay open to her was to make a good marriage. Unfortunately, she chose badly. The young lawyer from Berlin (now Kitchener), Ont., she married in 1872 was a decent enough man, but he lacked the fire to match Isabel, or to make a success of his practice. As the family sank into debt, Isabel gradually transferred her affections from her husband to her second child. As Willie, born in 1874, achieved success at university, and later in Ottawa (where as a dynamic civil servant he created the department of labor), Isabel idealized him as a kind of white knight. And Willie, it seemed, not only basked in the role but returned the compliment. He filled his diaries with encomiums to his mother's spirit and beauty. "She is, I think, the purest and sweetest soul that God ever made," he wrote.

"She is all tenderness and love, and knows nothing of selfishness."

As Gray makes clear, this is sentimental hogwash of a type not uncommon at the time. In reality, Gray argues, both mother and son were "self-centred and manipulative." Isabel knew how to wangle money out of Willie for her struggling household by smothering him with flattery and approval. And Willie used his growing influence in the family to control its affairs to his liking. He sabotaged the attempts of his older sister, Bella, to become a nurse, preferring that she stay home and look after their parents. And he interfered in a similar way—though sometimes more beneficially—in the lives of his younger brother and sister. His often sanctimonious letters home reveal him as a master of control, playing on family loyalties with a skill and ambiguity he would later make good use of as prime minister.

King never married. No one, in his mind, could measure up to Isabel. Any psychologist surveying his case would have plenty of grounds to be suspicious of his idealization of his mother, yet Gray offers few hints in *Mrs. King* that it was counterbalanced by any resentment or anger. It seems that by some mutual unconscious arrangement, they agreed to support each other's grandiosity. The dumpy, balding politician saw himself as a hero. A wife might have forced him to confront his own failings, but there is evidence in the biography that this was a task for which he had little heart.

Gray has beautifully re-created the social milieu of Berlin and of Toronto, where the Kings moved in 1893. Always short of money, they lived like characters in a Jane Austen novel, on the brittle edges of wealth and respectability. Isabel strove to find husbands for her daughters, and to navigate the arcane, snobbish world of the Victorian tea party—which included such variations as the strawberry tea, the rose tea, the tea-and-talk, and the high tea. Trapped in such an environment, what was an ambitious woman with the blood of William Lyon Mackenzie in her veins to do? Willie never stood a chance.

JOHN BEMROSE

# The woman behind the PM

## MRS. KING: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ISABEL MACKENZIE KING

By Charlotte Gray  
(Viking, 386 pages, \$32)

One November afternoon in 1908, a rather striking couple made their way into the governor general's mansion in Ottawa. The man was 33-year-old William Lyon Mackenzie King, who had just launched what would become a brilliant political career by winning the Ontario seat of North Waterloo in the recent federal election. Having just been appointed minister of labor in Sir Wilfrid Laurier's cabinet, King had come to join his fellow ministers and other dignitaries for a celebratory party. The white-haired woman on his arm, clad in a silk kimono he had picked out for her himself, was his mother, Isabel.

Charlotte Gray, the Ottawa-based author of the engrossing new biography *Mrs. King*, calls their appearance "the greatest moment of Isabel's life." It probably was, and not just because "Willie" had won an election. Isabel Mackenzie King, besides being the mother of a future prime minister, was also the daughter of William Lyon Mackenzie, the leader of the failed 1837 rebellion in Upper Canada. Born in 1843, during Mackenzie's subsequent exile to the United States, Isabel had grown up amid poverty, uncertainty and—after her family's return to Toronto in 1850—the hostility of her father's many enemies. But now, Isabel's son, who bore his grandfather's name, had swept her back to dignity and honor.

Something of the bizarre relationship between King and his moth-

**Mackenzie King was a mama's boy**