
Sandra Campbell’s *Both Hands: A Life of Lorne Pierce of Ryerson Press* is the culmination of decades of extensive research and obvious devotion to her subject. The result is a meticulous and probing study of one of Canada’s premier twentieth-century publishers – a much-needed investigation of Lorne Pierce’s seminal achievements over forty years as Ryerson Press’s general editor. Campbell has left no stone unturned in her painstaking efforts to unearth the details of her subject’s life and career, and her landmark portrait of a cultural dynamo will remain the authoritative book on Pierce for decades to come.

Campbell furnishes a traditional biography, beginning with a perceptive analysis of Pierce’s formative years in Delta, Ontario. She believes that his “boyhood, education, [and] early experiences” (8) inculcated the ideological values Pierce brought to Ryerson Press and the relationships he formed with authors. Campbell credits Pierce’s mother Harriet Pierce – more so than his father Edward Pierce or any other figure – as the greatest influence on his life. Harriet Pierce sustained her son with “the magic of her love both black and white,” (386) and transferred to him her own zealous ideal of a life of spiritual mission and public service. It was largely her vision for Pierce that fuelled his ambition and led to his ordination as a Methodist minister.

Campbell gives meaningful context to Pierce’s life story by limning the cultural history that shaped Canadian nationalism in the period from the First World War to Canada’s centenary in 1967. Pierce was first and always a nationalist. As publisher, he stressed that “[t]he literature of a country is the chief Alma Mater of the national spirit, and it should be fostered by every intelligent means” (352). Pierce’s unstinting and wide-ranging attempts to foster a nascent Canadian literature – unlike his fellow publishers, he was also a hands-on editor and prolific author – were underpinned by a number of major factors that informed his life and values. In her introduction, Campbell
enumerates those factors as the Methodist faith of Pierce’s parents; his father’s belief in freemasonry; the nationalism and idealism of his undergraduate institution, Queen’s University, Kingston; the ecumenism of his graduate studies at New York’s Union Theological Seminary; his military service during the First World War; his work as a Methodist minister; the 1920s ideologies of theosophy and cultural nationalism; and the support of his wife Edith Chown Pierce and his own commitment to family.

I was especially intrigued by Campbell’s chapters on the production of the Ryerson-Macmillan Readers series and the fractious relationship between Pierce and Macmillan Company of Canada publisher Hugh Eayrs. Pierce and Eayrs’s unlikely but fruitful partnership brought together individuals of opposite temperaments and work habits; it makes for a highly readable interlude. The connection between Pierce and artist C.W. Jefferys is also a highlight of Campbell’s study. In fact, Pierce emerges as an early advocate of Canadian art, and an especially enduring supporter of Jefferys and the Group of Seven painters. His generosity often extended to financial support of indigent artists and writers over the course of his life.

Less impressive was Pierce’s editorial mishandling of Bliss Carman’s selected poetry, published by McClelland and Stewart in 1954. His abridged version of many of Carman’s poems – Carman’s prodigious output was whittled down by Pierce to a mere 122 pages – is described by Campbell as “an editorial misjudgment” (455) that shows the corruption that can result when an editor wields the power at his disposal. In later life, Pierce was similarly damaging to the literary reputation of Marjorie Pickthall, whose work he lauded in 1925 in Marjorie Pickthall: A Book of Remembrance (issued by Ryerson Press) but downgraded in the 1940s and 1950s as inferior. In practice, Pierce’s criticism was coloured by his gendered preconceptions – he read women writers through the distorting lens of subordinate vulnerability – and his conservative values, as much as his cultural nationalism.

For all the attention Campbell lavishes on his professional pursuits, Pierce’s personal life with his wife, children, and friends is much less developed. With great sensitivity, Campbell describes Pierce’s physical struggles with deafness and lupus and the heavy toll they exacted. The independent Edith Chown Pierce, however, a life partner who long delayed her decision to marry Pierce, is a tantalizingly shadowy presence on the edge of Pierce’s busy world. Their marital relationship, so central to Pierce’s success, begs further development. There is little about Pierce’s children, but that may be
the direct result of Campbell’s indebtedness to Beth Pierce Robinson and the late L. Bruce Pierce. In exchange for their support of her work on their father, I suspect Pierce’s children may have requested Campbell’s discretion. Friends of Pierce are even less defined in this biography. Surely the archival record, at once bountiful and daunting as Campbell notes, had more to offer about Pierce’s life outside the Toronto office of Ryerson Press?

In this “doorstopper” of a volume – a term Campbell herself applies to a similarly lengthy volume of Bliss Carman’s collected poetry published in 1931 – I noted only eight typographical errors, a striking indicator of the careful and diligent production of this book. The prolonged gestation of this biography shows in several ways, however. First, it is extremely dense. Readers of Both Hands are given much information that weighs down the prose and hinders the narrative flow. Readerly engagement suffers somewhat under Campbell’s determination to include all she knows about Pierce – and it is a vast knowledge indeed. Second, the repetition of details signals the need for a more judicious editing of a volume that extends to 505 pages of text and includes 119 pages of notes. The effect of reading Both Hands is at once inspiring – Campbell’s Pierce is a fully human figure whose remarkable achievements did not come easily – and overwhelming. Both Pierce and the reader are often lost in this massive record of his life’s work. In this instance, the author’s deep knowledge of her subject might be seen at once as a boon and a blow to Pierce and reader alike.

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Toward the end of his engaging and sometimes frustrating memoir, long-time Toronto-based antiquarian book dealer David Mason quotes a bookseller named Fern Poel: “I’m just like any misfit in the trade. At some point you become unemployable and end up going into your hobby” (334). It is not surprising that this quotation resonates with Mason; a true iconoclast who admits he was never much good at holding on to a “real” job, he ended up, almost by fate, as a book dealer. Fortunately, he became, and remains, one of