

L.D.: Mayor Louis Taylor and the rise of Vancouver. Daniel Francis. Vancouver, Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004. 239 p., illus. \$21.95 hard cover.

In real life, L.D. Taylor took a pummeling from the fates. He now takes another from biographer Daniel Francis, and from most reviewers of Francis' book. No doubt Taylor was a bit of a devil, but it is time to give the devil his due, not add to the "odour of corruption that has tainted Taylor's reputation" The Texas journalist Molly Ivins has written "Young political reporters are always told there are three ways to judge a politician. The first is to look at the record. The second is to look at the record. And third, look at the record. The method is tried, true, time-tested, and pretty much infallible. In politics, the past is prologue. If a politician is left, right, weak, strong, given to the waffle of the flip-flop, or, as sometimes happens, an able soul who performs well under pressure, all that will be in the record." (Ivins, M., *Shrub; the short but happy life of George W. Bush*. N.Y., 2000. p.xii) Ivins' approach is sorely needed when it comes to evaluating the long career of L.D. Taylor, frequent mayor, and formidable figure in shaping the character and quality of the City of Vancouver.

"L.D. was not a visionary mayor", Francis writes. If he was not, has there ever been a visionary mayor of Vancouver? The examined record belies a so-dismissive characterization of Taylor. It is contrary to the documentation supplied by previous historians, even to the record Francis himself presents. Surely Taylor's initiatives and support for, among others, city amalgamation, a City Planning Commission, an airport, a civic archives, have something to do with 'vision'.

Although the name of L.D. Taylor is well-known to Vancouver historians, professional and amateur alike, it is rare to find today an average citizen in Vancouver who knows anything of Taylor's civic accomplishments. Judging by reviews of Daniel Francis' book in the local papers, most of our journalists are in a similar state of ignorance. Francis himself confesses that, though brought up in Vancouver, he was in his thirties before he happened upon references to L.D. Taylor. Eventually, writer Francis began to see Taylor as an intriguing character, the possible subject of a biography, which Francis himself would undertake.

A full biography of Taylor has long been wanting, and many people, myself among them, have earnestly hoped a historian, or at the very least a Ph.D. student of history, would take up the task. Most of the standard books about Vancouver - Morley, McDonald, Nicol, do give the flavour of the times, and credit Taylor with an important role in it. They record a number of Taylor's civic accomplishments as well as his spats and tribulations. But for some reason Taylor practically disappeared as a person of historical interest after his death. Apart from Ronald Kenvyn's series of articles in the Province in 1939, while Taylor was still alive, and David McFaul's excellent biographical sketch in 1979, there is almost nothing with a focus on Taylor. (Vancouver History 18:4, Aug. 1979.)

Now, more than fifty years after Taylor's death, it is disappointing, and passing strange, that Francis, who appears to admire Taylor in spite of himself, has failed to look at "the record...the record...the record" before coming out with a biography of the man. Instead, Francis has exhausted himself on trivial and personal questions, arising largely from his conversations with Taylor's great-grandson, Roy Werbel, and a file of personal letters and clippings dated before 1920. Unhappily, too many of Francis' statements are misleading, or innuendo at best: "Bigamy, embezzlement, drug abuse: it turned out that Louis Taylor was not only Vancouver's longest-serving mayor, but also by far its most colourful".

The tenor of this statement pervades not only Francis' book, it laces his recent published articles on Taylor in *The Beaver*, *The Vancouver Sun*, and elsewhere. The implications are scandalous. This is seriously unfair to Taylor and definitely is not good history.

Francis leaves one with a negative assessment of Taylor. To understand why, even a grudgingly admiring biographer would do this, a Molly Ivins reference to a book of her own is suggestive: "This book contains no news about the sex life of [...] nor about the drugs he has ingested, nor about whatever dark psychological demons drive him to seek [political office]. No sex, no drugs, no Siggie Freud - so why would anyone read it?" (Ivins, p.xi) The reference is obvious. The book wouldn't sell. Publishers have their price.

Francis did well to ferret out great-grandson Werbel's whereabouts. It would have been a real service to have written a careful article based on the files kept by Werbel, and on what he, Francis, could reasonably surmise, or better still, prove, about the embezzlement episode. Francis would then have supplied one chapter in a "Life of..." a chapter which would truly add something new to the story of a remarkable man. Titillating allusions are fit tabloid copy only. It is deplorable that they found their way into *The Beaver*, let alone into the book under review here.

A second major disappointment is Francis' discussion of the times in which Taylor lived and campaigned, specifically of the deeply-rent economic/political milieu. Michael Barnholden is the only reviewer who has called attention to this serious gap. He refers to 'class warfare'. He suggests that Taylor's real sin was his fight against special interest groups. Barnholden's suggestion is appealing. One finds certain writers, ostensibly on the side of the working man who also ignore Taylor. The warfare was within the left as well as between classes. Barnholden could have enlarged on his comment about class by pointing out that the analysis of Henry George was L.D. Taylor's guide in political economy, a

philosophy anathema to both extremes in the political spectrum. Francis' scant references to Henry George betray his own failure to understand that analysis. Nor does he recognize it as a potent force in Taylor's life and times, more is the pity, since a lesson from those days might help the City now.

The early 1900s were notorious for their deep wells of political partisanship, both provincial and federal. That partisanship was vicious at times; it coloured the municipal picture always. The long-standing enmity between G.G. McGeer and Taylor, for example, evidently began in 1911, when nominal-Liberal Taylor backed Conservative H.H. Stevens for Federal Member against Liberal McGeer. (The cabal of B.C. Liberals in those days was one Taylor couldn't stomach.) A lot of strings were pulled and deals made then; it is naive to believe otherwise. Is it not so today? Why Francis should name Taylor 'paranoid' to see hidden knots of influence in the political scene is inexplicable, but he does, putting Taylor in the same company as John Birch and Joseph McCarthy!

I continue to hope that a professional historian, preferably one with economic and political savvy, will take up a full biography. It will require months of searching over years of records, not only in the City Archives, but in the minutes of many other civic institutions - City Council, Police Commission, Planning Commission, Library Board (Taylor was first appointed to the Library Board in 1903), and newspaper files, memoirs and biographies of other city notables, of which there are now several. Sadly, Daniel Francis has laboured to produce just a warped, blurred picture, relying to catch the reader's interest, it seems, by reference to "sex, drugs and Siggie Freud".

L.D. Taylor, eight times Mayor of Vancouver, awaits a serious biographer.

Mary Rawson Mary Rawson presented a talk to the Vancouver Historical Society on L.D. Taylor in 1986 and published an article on Taylor in the BC Historical News Winter 2000.

(Daniel Francis' book L.D. Mayor Taylor and the Rise of Vancouver was awarded the City of Vancouver's Book Award in 2004.)

← M. Rawson