

A LIFE IN  
OUR TIMES

— *Memoirs* —

JOHN  
KENNETH  
GALBRAITH

*John Kenneth Galbraith*

# A LIFE IN OUR TIMES

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MEMOIRS

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# **A LIFE IN OUR TIMES**

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JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH

American Capitalism:  
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Almost Everyone's Guide to Economics  
The Nature of Mass Poverty  
Annals of an Abiding Liberal  
A Life in Our Times

*To Katie and Jean and David and Andrew  
with love*

## A Word of Thanks

A FRIEND once told me of seeing Noel Coward off to Jamaica where Coward was going to write his memoirs. He asked him if he had an abundance of notes and records. "No," Coward replied, "I have a memory like an elephant. In fact, elephants often consult me." In writing this account, I have relied similarly on recollection (though with some passing support from notes, records and published writing), and I have done so with similar confidence. My memory proved very good on the larger shape of events and also on the more salient conversations, actions, pronouncements, speeches, scenes and absurdities. However, it was sadly defective on dates, middle initials, minor geography and the other trivia so necessary, nonetheless, for verisimilitude. For help in getting things right, or nearly so, I had the help, as always, of my friend and partner Andrea Williams of whom I tell more in these pages. For more specific research I relied on a learned and lovely colleague, Londa Schiebinger of the Harvard Department of History, and my equally accomplished and attractive friend Rosamaria Toruño Tanghetti, who took up life in the United States as an alternative to the Nicaragua of the Somozas. Mrs. Tanghetti also typed and retyped and then corrected and typed yet again the manuscript of this book. I am grateful to her, and only with difficulty do I avoid being grateful to Anastasio Somoza Debayle. Edith Tucker of Wellesley, when not serving the excellent school board of that town, ran my office and otherwise made it possible for me to keep my attention on this book. I have elsewhere described her as the most comprehensively over-qualified office manager in recent history. She took the place of Sarah Field-Johnson, who came to my assistance from London only to be lost, alas, to marital fidelity. Nothing can be so inconvenient.

To Mrs. Tucker and Mrs. Field-Johnson my warm and affectionate thanks.

Catherine Galbraith read these pages, provided much information and made many corrections. With our talented sons, John Alan, Peter Woodard and James Kenneth, she is a presence throughout this book. If she and they are not more visible, it is partly because this is, deliberately, a view outward on events, people and ideas. I have not turned to look within on family and personal life, perhaps partly because there isn't much on which to grieve. My life has been without the agony that sustains interest in such matters and which encourages the associated introspection. For this happy passage through a certain amount of self-centered concern and toil I have greatly to thank those who have been so enduring and tolerant in their love.

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## Above the Lakes

THE SOUTHERN ONTARIO countryside is devoid of topographic, ethnic or historical interest. It is a flattish acreage extending some two hundred miles from the Detroit River to the Niagara River in which rich land alternates with some that is sandy, ill-drained or otherwise rejected. There are no natural features worth noting. The population is ethnically only slightly more diverting; it consists in the main of Scots or, as we called ourselves there, the Scotch. Our forebears were expelled from the Highlands between 1780 and 1830 when their lairds discovered that sheep were both more profitable and, as they moved over the hillside, more rewarding to the eye. The larger history touched this favored region only when Colonel Richard Airey, nephew of Colonel Thomas Talbot, founder of the Talbot settlement midway between the two rivers, returned to the motherland to fight for Queen and country in the Crimean War, for his was the name on the orders that dispatched the Light Brigade. And less dramatically again, in World War I, when the inhabitants showed themselves generally adverse to the slaughter. My father manifested his opposition by serving on the draft board, as it would now be called, and exempting all those who did not wish to go.

There was a final brush with history when my home county of Elgin, and in some measure my father as a Liberal leader, sent Mitchell Frederick Hepburn to Parliament and to be Premier of Ontario. So disastrous was his administration that the Conservatives have been in office in the province almost unchallenged all of the thirty-nine years since.

The Scotch, even when in dense mass as in Elgin County, are the only race to which no politician ever thinks it worthwhile to appeal. Irish, Jewish, French Canadian, Welsh, German, Scandinavian, Ukrainian, black and Chicano voters are solicited by oratory, uncon-

vincing efforts at identification and inspired banality. No vote-seeker ever dons kilts, praises the bagpipes or utters so much as a phrase of Gaelic. It is not entirely that such activities are considered ridiculous or barbaric; it would appear that we have so little political self-recognition as to make the effort not worthwhile.

The Ontario farms were of a hundred to two hundred acres and, in my youth, conscientiously tended. There was less often pride in the house, the orchard and the lawn, called the yard. The cattle were of much distinction and bred for buyers from across the United States and as far distant as the Argentine. In the autumn the small woodlands were rich in color, and in midwinter, after a fresh, deep snow, the land was wonderfully, starkly white and black. The people were diligent, given to much harmless pleasure in recounting the physical and mental disabilities of their neighbors and greatly law-abiding. No houses were ever locked, though perhaps partly because there was little in them to steal. In the neighboring village of Dutton there was a constable, but his job was widely regarded as honorary except as it involved the suppression of the violence to which certain of my countrymen, when drunk, were inclined to resort. I have told elsewhere and in detail of the Scotch.<sup>1</sup>

The founding member of our family in Canada, according to his gravestone in Black's Cemetery in Dunwich Township near the village of Wallacetown, was born in Argyllshire in 1771 and died in Ontario in 1874, although some later research by a clan historian suggests that, if these dates are accurate, he was born a year or two before his parents first met. My father, a former teacher who never fully rejected that profession, headed a cooperative insurance company that he had helped to organize (as he had once helped organize the first telephone service in the neighborhood) and was a moderately well-compensated township and county official. My mother, a beautiful, affectionate and decidedly firm woman, died when her children — my brother, my two sisters and I — were not yet all in their teens. Our farms, there being two, embraced 150 acres of mostly arable land to which in some years we added the unused acres of aged, infirm or temporarily disabled neighbors. In every respect they were working farms, a distinction then unknown, for there was no other kind. The centerpiece of our agriculture was a distin-

<sup>1</sup> In *The Scotch* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964), which was published in Britain as *Made to Last* and *The Non-Potable Scotch*.

guished, though not famous, herd of purebred Shorthorn cattle. The working aspect of the farm, the Shorthorns and my father's preeminent position in the community all greatly influenced my later existence. This I should now explain.

\* \* \*

No one can understand farmers, not alone in the Americas but in all countries, unless it is known that, the rarest exceptions apart, they are afflicted with a serious sense of inferiority — what once was called an inferiority complex. This, then, is compensated for by vigorous assertion of the economic importance of agriculture and the spiritual and moral qualities that accrue from close association with the soil. Town and city dwellers regard themselves as of intrinsically superior sophistication. Working farmers, as distinct from landlords, are always struggling with the thought that they are hicks. These attitudes also carry over to academic, professional and political association with agriculture, a matter to which I will recur.

In our family, and in my case in particular, the sense of inferiority and the counterpart tendency to assertive compensation were made more complex, and possibly also more offensive, by the acknowledged social and public position of the clan. The Galbraiths were regarded, we believed rightly, as being more intelligent than others. We were also modestly more affluent. Many of our neighbors did not know their position on major political and other issues — the practical benefits of lower tariffs, cooperative buying of fertilizer or binder twine and the provincial highway system or the case against going to the trenches in World War I — until they heard my father providing it. My legacy was the inherent insecurity of the farm-reared boy in combination with an aggressive feeling that I owed it to all I encountered to make them better informed.

A more commonplace consequence of an early exposure to agriculture is a deeply valid appreciation of the nature of manual labor. It leaves all of minimal sensitivity with an enduring knowledge of its unpleasantness. A long day following a plodding, increasingly reluctant team behind a harrow endlessly back and forth over the uninspiring Ontario terrain persuaded one that all other work was easy. This early life could hardly have been in greater contrast with life at Harvard where more than six hours of teaching a week is often considered a grave impairment of academic freedom. Regularly since

coming to the university, I have been approached at the faculty club, on social occasions and even in the Yard by colleagues who, with an unconvincingly worried look, have said, "Ken, aren't you working too hard?" There was a book last year, another in prospect, my teaching, something in politics. Back of the query lies their natural concern for the union rules. Only with difficulty have I suppressed my reply: "The trouble with you, my friend, is that you've never worked on a farm."

Work on an automobile assembly line, a construction crew or possibly even collecting garbage, all in the company of congenial companions and improved by the higher pay, can shine by comparison with that on a farm. It is this contrast that now brings Turks from the peasant villages of Anatolia to make Berlin one of the major Turkish cities in the world; Italians and Spaniards to do the hard toil of the Swiss; Algerians and Portuguese to man French production lines; and people from the rural South to Detroit. Detroit is not a paradise except to those who have known sharecropping in the Deep South or the meager returns beaten from the poor farms of the Appalachian plateau. If the industrially advanced countries survive, workers will eventually come to Western Europe from the farms of Egypt, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh to do what Italians, Yugoslavs and Spaniards will, in their turn, find too tedious. And routine industry in the United States will be saved by the Mexicans.

\* \* \*

In rural Ontario in my youth the sons of the more prestigious clans continued in school, escaped on into schoolteaching or, more rarely, the ministry, medicine or the law. That was so of the Galbraiths. The others were withdrawn from school at an early age, for education was, quite rightly, thought inimical to the work ethic. After a leisured sojourn in a high school classroom a boy was lost to heavy farm toil. And a local (possibly universal) saying affirmed that the education was redundant: "A good farmer needs a strong back and a weak mind."

Those so prepared for farming would often go on to Detroit, frequently for a winter, sometimes forever. Movement back and forth across the Detroit River was commonplace and based on the secure knowledge that no immigration or customs official could tell a Canadian from an American by inspection alone. We were, of all the

peoples of the world, the most nearly emancipated from the burdens of national passion. Our school books featured the Union Jack at the front, spoke warmly of Major General James Wolfe, William Lyon Mackenzie, Louis Joseph Papineau, Sir John Alexander Macdonald and King George V. But none of these stood against the better hours, more congenial work and vastly higher pay in the United States.

In those civilized days, indeed, it was felt by some that responsible citizenship did not involve an exclusive commitment to the political life of Canada. Canada might be a mother, but Michigan was a mistress. Canadian elections are on no fixed schedule; if a government is forced out or sees a chance of prolonging its tenure, they can be in spring, summer, autumn or even, as recently, in the Canadian winter. American elections, then as now, were always in November. This was after the crops were harvested in Canada and the seasonal migration to the assembly lines had begun. Accordingly, a man could vote in Canada in the summer and, by courtesy of the Detroit Democratic organization that assigned registered names, possibly from the local funeral directors, in Michigan in the autumn. No thought of corruption was involved. Men wished to have the best people in office in both countries. I have never understood why one's affections must be confined, as once with women, to a single country.

There is advantage otherwise. In May 1963, President John F. Kennedy and Prime Minister Lester B. (Mike) Pearson met at Hyannisport to discuss, among other things, the long-troubled question of Canadian air flights into the United States. For a decade or more, when the Canadian airlines asked to fly Canadians to Miami, Los Angeles or other centers of commerce, culture or rest, they were asked what routes they had to offer in return. The major Canadian cities are at most only a few miles from the border. There was no great American demand for a route to Moosonee on James Bay or the yet more northerly metropolis of Yellowknife. The stalemate caused by this absence of a *quid pro quo* had lasted for years, requiring Canadians going deeply into the United States to transship to American carriers at Detroit, Buffalo or, at most, New York.

The two heads of government agreed to appoint a two-man committee to investigate and recommend. That would get things off dead center. Recalling that I had frequently identified myself as a

Canadian, Kennedy appointed me the American representative. Recalling the same, Pearson, a friend of many years, said I would do as the Canadian representative. Both agreed that so efficient an arrangement called for a measure of reticence. I held meetings, first in Washington, then in Ottawa, with carriers and regulatory officials and found that the long-range jet had made everyone dissatisfied with the current transshipment arrangements. Also, in contrast with most international disputes, nothing was involved but money — prospective earnings — and these could be divided equally. After I negotiated with myself on the few serious points of difference, I rendered a judgment satisfactory to the carriers of both countries. While thus engaged, I was treated with marked courtesy by all the airlines. My recommendation then went back for more orthodox bargaining between national representatives, which, needless to say, took much more time. Clearly my dual allegiance had been advantageous.

\* \* \*

In the early autumn of 1926, in my eighteenth year, and as another aspect of the influence of agriculture, in particular of the Shorthorns of which by then I was considered to have a highly professional knowledge, I enrolled in the Ontario Agricultural College. I had been attending high school since the age of ten, but my schooling was subject to numerous interruptions for farm work and once for what my family believed was bad health. My record, which did reflect an early addiction to extensive but undisciplined reading, was indifferent. In keeping with many of my contemporaries and many of that age since, I had considered myself superior to sustained intellectual effort. But in those days, given a high school diploma, admission to a college, any college, was entirely a matter of money. This our farm provided, and there was also an arrangement by which the members of the family were so spaced that the earlier could contribute to the college costs of the later.

The Ontario Agricultural College, with which were associated schools of home economics and veterinary medicine and, oddly, an academy for instruction in the science and art of baking, was then, as it is still, located in the city of Guelph, some fifty or sixty miles west of Toronto. The University of Toronto granted us our degrees.