

PERSONAL LETTERS OF A PUBLIC MAN

**The Family Letters of
JOHN G. DIEFENBAKER**



Edited by
THAD MCILROY

With an Introduction by
J. L. GRANATSTEIN

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FOREWORD

I HAD THOUGHT TO WRITE A PASSIONATE NOTE about my reasons for editing the Diefenbaker family letters. But I imagine that my reasons for editing these letters are roughly the same as yours for getting hold of a copy of this book – I thought John Diefenbaker was an extraordinary Canadian whose personal life was much overshadowed by his public life, and I thought his family papers might be important and revealing. I wasn't disappointed, and I don't think you will be either, but let me throw in a few words of caution.

John Diefenbaker was very much aware that he would occupy a prominent position in Canadian history. Consequently he knew that all his written documents, be they Cabinet memoranda or letters home to his mother, might one day be subject to public scrutiny. This realization was bound to make Diefenbaker slightly circumspect in what he committed to paper. At the same time, in writing a letter home, he wanted to communicate some news, some feelings and a few ideas, otherwise the exercise would have been pointless. This precarious balance is much in evidence in the Diefenbaker family letters. At times, evaluating their importance is as much a question of what is not said at a significant moment as what is.

There are some 65,000 documents in the Family Series of the Diefenbaker Papers held in the Diefenbaker Centre at the University of Saskatchewan. There are about 250 letters in this book. Daunted by the need to offer a volume of reasonable length, I've endeavored to make the best representative selection possible.

A great many of the letters concern themselves with the everyday

minutiae that is of little interest to the general reader and were easily omitted. Long portions of many of the letters chosen would fall into the same classification, and so were edited in order that more letters could be included. Spelling for the most part was corrected, as was punctuation, although the unique grammar was left intact.

I think that the reader will find that J.L. Granatstein's introductory material – at the beginning of the book, and before each chapter – serves well to locate the time in which these letters were written. In some cases notes have been added where I thought it helpful to explain references, though my general policy has been to keep these to a minimum, to let the letters flow and to permit the reader to make his or her own evaluation. Names are clarified where they first occur, or if they haven't been encountered in a while, except where the name was a personal friend of no political standing. A few of the surnames of these friends have been deleted where the nature of the communication seemed to make such an identification undesirable. The dating of the letters has been made uniform (again with a few exceptions), and the name of the place of writing has been added where not originally specified.

A few thanks are in order. My partners in Arcadia House have backed this project from its inception, and have provided much support in ensuring its completion. Sharon Mitchell and all of the staff of the Diefenbaker Centre were co-operative and generous to a fault. Without their help this book could not have been attempted. The staff of the Elm Street Computer Terminal in Toronto saw to it that these words got off the ubiquitous diskettes and onto pieces of paper. J.L. Granatstein was brought into the project to write an introduction, and ended up unbidden as the virtual co-editor of this book – his knowledge of the Diefenbaker era has been invaluable. And last, but by no means least, I would like to thank my editors at Doubleday, Denise Schon and Gwyneth Runnings. They were enthusiastic at the beginning, quietly supportive for the duration, and gently prodding when I found myself behind schedule – one can ask for nothing more.

– Thad McIlroy
Toronto, 1985

INTRODUCTION

THE PRIVATE LETTERS OF PUBLIC MEN can always tell us much. Nowadays, we see the public faces of our leaders on television every night, always smiling, always polite, almost always in full control of the carefully arranged events their public relations experts decide are right for their images. But what, if anything, goes on behind those well-composed facades? What do our leaders really say and feel and think when they talk to their parents or wives or children?

We know something of our past leaders. Most of the political papers of Canada's prime ministers have been preserved and are housed in the Public Archives of Canada in Ottawa. Here we can find Sir John A. Macdonald planning for Confederation and worrying over the details of patronage. Here is Sir Wilfrid Laurier mulling over the details involved in sending a Canadian contingent to the Boer War or Sir Robert Borden agonizing over the difficulties of imposing conscription in 1917. Here too are Arthur Meighen and Louis St. Laurent, Alexander Mackenzie and Sir Charles Tupper, Lester Pearson and Pierre Trudeau. Their records are essential for historians trying to reconstruct the past, struggling to fit motive onto the bare bones of historical fact.

But what were the prime ministers really like as individuals? Most Canadians know that Macdonald drank, but how many today remember that his daughter, Mary, was hydrocephalic? Did that familial tragedy affect Macdonald? To ask the question, of course, is to answer it. We all know that it must have affected the Prime Minister, day in and day out, in a thousand different ways. How unfortunate for historians then that Macdonald's papers do not contain hundreds of letters to his wife talking

over the details of the daughter's illness and expressing the Old Man's fears and concerns. Sir John Thompson, one of John A's successors as Prime Minister in the 1890s, did write regularly to his wife, in part because she remained in Nova Scotia throughout most of his Ottawa career. That correspondence, tender and personal and political, forms the very heart of Peter Waite's fine new biography of Thompson, *The Man from Halifax*, and it serves to remind us what we are missing from the others.

Then there is Mackenzie King, Canada's longest-serving Prime Minister, a man who dominated Canadian politics from 1921 until his retirement in 1948. King's papers are a national treasure, a record of all events of importance and a storehouse of trivia, including Christmas cards and engraved invitations to long-ago dinner parties. But the King record also includes an extraordinary diary, an almost life-long recounting of events from Mackenzie King's own perspective. That source is important for all aspects of twentieth century Canadian politics, of course, but it is just as important for what it tells us about the fussy and complex bachelor who ruled us for so long. As we now know, King was a spiritualist who revelled in seances; he was a man who was attracted to women but who never married, in substantial part because he could never overcome the baleful influence exercised by his mother on his psyche – both while she was alive and after her death. And some historians and novelists also argue, unconvincingly in this author's view, that King repeatedly used the services of prostitutes. The point is not whether or not King was crazy or wicked; the point is that Mackenzie King's diaries, for better or worse, allow Canadians to grapple with the full complexity of an extraordinary man. Worth considering too is that King's will left instructions for his diaries to be destroyed, a decision that his literary executors later overrode (resulting in substantial damage to King's reputation).

And now we have John Diefenbaker's papers. The Diefenbaker Papers are housed in the Diefenbaker Centre in Saskatoon (with a microfilm copy at the Public Archives of Canada) and, although all the Diefenbaker correspondence and memoranda are not yet open for public scrutiny, it is already clear that the collection as a whole is of first-rank importance. The Papers comprise legal papers, material on the years prior to 1940, on the years from 1940 to 1956, and on Diefenbaker's first period as Leader of the Opposition in 1956-57, all of which are now open. The bulk of the most important political material, still closed to scrutiny, undoubtedly will be found in the Prime Minister's Office papers and in the Leader of the Opposition files from 1963 to 1967.

Happily, Diefenbaker left a substantial body of private family correspondence, the raw material of this book, organized by the Centre's archivists into the Diefenbaker Family Series. Because he outlived all the members of his family, because he was a lawyer and the executor of his family's estates, and because he wished to preserve the story of his forebears, the family correspondence in the Diefenbaker collection is probably the most extensive of that of any Canadian prime minister. Here we can see the formative influences that shaped John Diefenbaker. We can read what his parents wrote to their son, we can watch his brother, Elmer, getting into scrapes all through his life, and we can come to know his old Uncle Ed. Most important, perhaps, here we can trace John Diefenbaker's relationship with his first wife, Edna, and follow the courtship of his second wife, Olive. In other words, the family letters of John Diefenbaker allow us that rarest and most privileged access of all – an insight into the private life of a most public man.

John Diefenbaker's parents had moved West from Ontario in 1903. William Diefenbaker was a school teacher – a bookish, dreamy man with an interest in politics – who had decided that the Prairies were to be the land of opportunity for his family. He purchased a homestead near Borden, Northwest Territories (which became Borden, Saskatchewan in 1905) soon after his arrival and, while waiting for the chance to build and to farm, he supported the family by teaching. With his brother Ed, William Diefenbaker broke ground in 1905 and built the shacks in which the family could live. Life was hard. By 1909, the Diefenbakers had cleared barely thirty acres and ran an operation that at its greatest extent comprised three cows and a single horse and had a cash value, including the wood used to build the house, of \$400. The next year, failing at Prairie farming as so many did in those years, the Diefenbakers moved to Saskatoon where William took a job in the provincial civil service. William Diefenbaker retired in 1937 and died in 1945.

His wife, Mary Bannerman Diefenbaker, was the tough one in the family, the one who kept it together in the bad years and who clearly dominated her slightly feckless husband. Mary Diefenbaker was a largely unlettered woman, as her correspondence in this book makes clear, but she had far more determination and drive than her husband. If John Diefenbaker had a burning ambition to succeed in politics, it was because his mother force-fed this to him with his daily bread; if he wanted to do good, it was because his mother would not tolerate anything else and continued to remind him so in her letters; and if he married relatively late, it was almost surely because he could not find a woman who was either the same as, or markedly different from, Mary

Diefenbaker. Her influence on her son was enormous and powerful, lasting until her death in 1961 when her boy was Prime Minister of Canada.

Mary Diefenbaker had less success in transmitting her drive and grit to her younger son, Elmer. Born in 1899, four years after John, Elmer was his father's boy. He too was a dreamer, an almost carefree young man who went to university, served in both world wars, and worked at a variety of selling jobs, often drumming through rural Saskatchewan. Elmer's real talent was as a local political organizer, a gatherer of political information that could be, and often was, of great use to his brother; even so, Elmer, who remained unmarried and who lived for a long stretch near the end of his life in a YMCA, was always a trial to his older and vastly more successful brother. To his credit John almost never allowed his exasperation to show through more than fifty years of correspondence that ended only with Elmer's death in 1971.

Edna Brower, John's first wife, was in her own way another trial for John Diefenbaker. Pretty, slender and vivacious, Edna was a few years younger than the 34-year-old lawyer she married in 1929. She was much livelier and more personable than her politically-minded husband, and it was Edna who put whatever verve there was in Diefenbaker's early political campaigns and who, some observers claimed, had really won the election in Lake Centre, Saskatchewan for her husband in 1940. The Diefenbaker marriage had its difficulties, particularly after the move to Ottawa, and Edna, depressed and frightened, was institutionalized for a time in 1945-46. The letters she wrote to John from the sanitarium are surely among the most poignant ever addressed to a public figure from his spouse. Edna's last years were a torment for her and her husband. She died of leukemia in 1951.

But for John Diefenbaker it all worked out well in the end when he met Olive Freeman Palmer, an acquaintance from Saskatoon in the days of the Great War. Olive, a widow with one child, Carolyn, worked for the Ontario Department of Education in Toronto as a specialist in guidance counselling. The two fell in love very shortly after Edna's death, and the courtship, despite a few minor squalls that show in the letters they exchanged, progressed smoothly to marriage in December, 1953. Olive Diefenbaker became the rock upon which John now built his political career, his unfailing supporter in every crisis of his years as Conservative leader, and she quickly drove the memories of Edna from his mind (and until recently from the history books). As the chatelaine of the Prime Minister's residence, she set a model of hospitality and warmth that endeared her to the country. Her death in 1976, following a long and

painful struggle with arthritis and a stroke, left her husband bereft and deprived him of the last of the three remarkable women on whom he had depended for so much and for so long. Mary, Edna and Olive Diefenbaker had had much to do with the successful political figure that he became.

And what of John Diefenbaker? What do these family letters tell us about this man from Prince Albert? The first point that emerges clearly is that Diefenbaker lived politics to an extraordinary (and perhaps unhealthy) extent. Almost all his letters, no matter the family member to whom they were written, talk about politics and those involved in them. Moreover, they demonstrate how remarkably single-minded Diefenbaker was in his determination to get into politics and to succeed once there. This shows best in the remarkable first letter he wrote home to Saskatoon from Ottawa after his election in 1940. The Conservative leader, Dr. R.J. Manion, had been defeated in the general election and the caucus unceremoniously dumped him. That meant that the Tories needed a House leader for the parliamentary session, and John Diefenbaker, still a novice politician with nothing but a long record of defeats behind him, actually contemplated running for the post. Not only that, but he seemed to feel it necessary to explain to his family, and especially to his mother, why he had not. Clearly, John was the bearer of his determined mother's hopes, and that burden was the spur that drove him on.

Something else stands out clearly from the first Ottawa letters. As it had in the Great War, Diefenbaker's Germanic-sounding surname was a definite liability in wartime Ottawa and in the proudly British Conservative party. Again and again, Diefenbaker referred to this problem, his sensitivity never easing over the years. Indeed, as late as the mid-1960s, the Chief almost sued *Maclean's* for running a cartoon that showed him dressed as a Prussian officer. That sensitivity unquestionably was at the root of Diefenbaker's long crusade for "One Canada," a nation where people were not French-Canadians or English-Canadians or German-Canadians, but just Canadians, pure and simple. He had suffered for his name and, to his credit, he did not want others to suffer for theirs. As these letters demonstrate, those attitudes required him to rise above the casual prejudice and ethnic slurs that he had grown up with. One Canada was a noble goal, but it flew in the face of Québécois sensitivities and the desires of many other Canadians to preserve their heritage against the forces of assimilation.

The discrimination that Diefenbaker suffered for his name probably led also to his concern for civil liberties, the single issue that first drew

him to public attention during the war and kept him there in peace. The Liberal governments of Mackenzie King and Louis St. Laurent had grown used to power between 1935 and 1957 and were unafraid to exercise it; in the process, peoples' rights sometimes got trampled, and Diefenbaker was always on the watch for abuses. He opposed rule by order-in-council, he stood for the rights of Parliament and the rights of the little man against big government, and in power he passed the Canadian Bill of Rights, a milestone in our history. The one blot on this honorable record is that, despite the claims in his memoirs, Diefenbaker did *not* speak out against the removal of Canadians of Japanese ethnicity from the Pacific Coast in the months after Pearl Harbor brought North America to war with Japan.

If Diefenbaker's sensitivity and concern for civil liberties stand out in the family letters, one trait that is almost always absent is the bitterness that, in the judgment of many observers, poisoned his political life. The string of five political defeats he suffered in federal, provincial and municipal politics before 1940 clearly had helped to convince Diefenbaker that people were out to get him. "They" did not want him and, over his career, "they" expanded to include the Grits and the socialists, elements in his own party, Toronto and Montreal corporations and businessmen, the armed forces, the public service, the press, the Americans, and even, on occasion, the British. As much as anything else, the bitterness and suspicion Diefenbaker fostered and generated in his party led to the fall of his government in 1963 and, almost certainly, to the tenacious way he hung on to the leadership of his party so as not to give "them" the satisfaction of driving him out. But that trait, while not wholly absent from the family letters, does not dominate. Probably some things were so well understood that they did not have to be said to those at home; some things were best left unsaid.

Who then was John Diefenbaker? As the letters in this book show, he was a man who loved those who had borne him and shaped his personality and career. He depended on them all, and they did not ever really let him down. He was a Westerner, a man whose ideas and attitudes had been formed on the Prairies. He was a *progressive* Conservative, a man who knew that the state had to help alleviate people's suffering. He was a civil libertarian who understood that the state could not have untrammelled authority and could be allowed to go only so far. He was a great orator who struck a responsive chord in millions of Canadians with his vision of what Canada might be. John Diefenbaker was a great Canadian, a leader who will be remembered as the man who toppled the entrenched, impregnable and smug Grits. But he was neither a great ad-

ministrator nor a great prime minister, not one who could marshal his colleagues and the bureaucracy to implement his vision for his country. He found decisions very difficult to make, for their consequences affected hundreds of thousands of people and even the security of the state. As a private Member of Parliament, Diefenbaker had agonized over such questions as where he might run for election; as Prime Minister, the scale and the complexity of the problems increased in quantum leaps, and he found genuine agony in making the hard choices that every leader must. The Diefenbaker promise, then, was probably greater than the performance, but that judgement is one over which historians will argue for generations.

Few will disagree that John Diefenbaker was one of Canada's most "human" leaders, a man of the people with few pretensions. Now and for the first time, thanks to these family letters, we can see the Chief complete – as son and brother, as lover and husband and, of course, always as politician and public figure.

– J.L. Granatstein
Toronto, 1985

