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**Paul Litt, *Elusive Destiny: The Political Vocation of John Napier Turner*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011. Pp xi + 495, illus. \$39.95 (cloth). ISBN: 978-0-7748-2264-0.**

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Any observer of Canadian politics over the past four decades could testify to the nasty internal divisions within the Liberal Party of Canada. Once dubbed “The Governing Party,” the federal Liberals are a deeply divided group, split over ideology, vision for the country, and leadership preferences. While these internal squabbles have sometimes been suppressed, they have often flared into view with tales of backstabbing, intrigue, and dirty deeds, all to the delight of a gleeful media eager to report on the party’s latest palace intrigue. John Turner, Canada’s Prime Minister for seventy-nine days in 1984 (the second-shortest term in Canadian history), was no stranger to those divisions. Indeed, as Paul Litt ably discusses in *Elusive Destiny: The Political Vocation of John Napier Turner*, the deep fractures within the Liberal Party go a long way to explaining why Turner, a man whose political star seemed to be burning so brightly in the early 1960s, largely failed to deliver on that promise. Turner’s term as Liberal chief was book-ended by party leaders — Pierre Elliott Trudeau and Jean Chrétien — who had much greater success in achieving and maintaining political power. But was Turner, as Litt contends, the right man at the wrong time?

Litt’s biography of Turner draws extensively on interviews, media coverage, cabinet documents, and Turner’s personal papers. He reconstructs a detailed portrait that extends from Turner’s childhood in London and Ottawa through to his retirement from politics in 1990. The focus is primarily on Turner’s political trajectory and thus the personal side of Turner’s life largely disappears from view after his election to Parliament, apart from a few brief mentions of his wife Geills. At a few key junctures, Litt interjects some commentary about Turner’s machismo and somewhat insecure approach to his masculinity, setting his readers up for the infamous bum-patting incidents of 1984. Allegations of alcohol abuse, although arising regularly throughout Turner’s career, are largely dismissed as sanctimonious preaching or the work of scandal-seeking media and opponents. Similarly, Turner’s post-Parliamentary life is largely skipped over. The resulting biography is one that will largely appeal to policy wonks and political observers, with extremely detailed accounts of a variety of key policy areas where Turner was a central player and, of course, of the Liberal in-fighting and leadership struggles.

For historians of the 1960s, ‘70s and ‘80s, Litt’s biography contains a wealth of information on policies ranging from the omnibus bill of the late-1960s that, among other things, decriminalized many homosexual activities (which Turner found “repugnant”), to changes to Canada’s abortion policies, the *Official Languages Act*, the 1970 October Crisis, the 1970s oil crisis, stagflation, and the 1980s Meech Lake Accord and Free Trade Agreement. Litt does an excellent job of providing detail and context about these issues while also delving into Turner’s particular role in these events and his perspective on these changes. In so doing, he advances the argument that Turner was the leading Anglophone Liberal of his

generation, socially liberal but fiscally conservative, with a talent (at least in the 1960s and 1970s) for brokerage and compromise along with a deft personal touch in resolving and minimizing conflict. In this account, John Turner was the key figure in the Trudeau government from 1968 to 1976 who was able to smooth over opposition to many of Trudeau's policies, and make them work. The roots of Turner's opposition to the Canada-United States Free Trade Agreement, born not out of opposition to trade liberalization but of concerns that Canada would not benefit as much as the United States from this bilateral deal, are also explored, going back to early work done by Turner on the Columbia River Treaty as a parliamentary secretary.

For Litt, this Rhodes scholar, who only barely missed representing Canada in the Olympics (twice!), was clearly the rising star in the Liberal Party of the 1960s. Accordingly, the central question is why did Turner fail to achieve his promise? He missed his first crack at the Liberal leadership in 1968 when the party opted for the (older) Pierre Trudeau who captured the youth demographic. Then, after returning from private law practice (after leaving politics in 1976) he won the Liberal leadership in 1984, only to go down to the worst defeat in the history of the party in the subsequent election and then fail once again to bring the Liberals into government in 1988. For Turner's supporters, this seemed baffling.

Litt advances a two-fold argument to explain Turner's ultimately ill-fated political career. The first element concerns media and image, arguing that Turner's image was too "hot" (to use McLuhan's term) for the television era, and that he never fully succeeded in mastering this medium on which he appeared too aggressive, tense, and ill-at-ease. The second also relates to the media: Litt claims that unceasing attacks from his predecessor (Trudeau) and successor (Chrétien) and a disloyal caucus dogged his years in office, leaving him open to a feeding-frenzy of media speculation about his leadership that undermined his authority and public image. In the book's narrative of his politics and policies, Turner had his finger on the public mood and was the ideal compromiser to maintain — or perhaps re-attain — national unity in the troubled 1970s and 1980s had he only the chance to prove what he could do. Instead, as Litt puts it: "Turner's leadership, it seemed, was one damned mutiny after another"(370). While Litt acknowledges that the Turner of the 1980s had lost some of his ability to compromise and to manage conflict, his explanations largely turn to forces external to Turner and his supporters to explain his political woes.

The narrative presented here is one that will be pleasing to supporters of Turner, and indeed of later Liberal leader Paul Martin Jr. But it is not one that is without problems, and supporters of Turner's rivals will likely question it. Perhaps the largest issue, and one that may well resonate with readers of this journal, is that Litt devotes relatively little attention to the fundamental intellectual and ideological differences between the Turner/Martin and Trudeau/Chrétien wings of the Liberal Party. In particular, on how to address issues of national identity and the place of Quebec within Canada, Trudeau and Turner were leagues apart. Nowhere is this more evident than in their opposing positions on the Meech Lake Accord, a fact that Litt acknowledges but downplays in his accounting for why Trudeau and Chrétien were so critical of Turner and his leadership. As John English and Max and Monique Nemni's recent biographies of Trudeau have pointed out,<sup>1</sup> Trudeau's approach to issues of nationalism was the product of a long-term intellectual development and it was carefully thought out. Turner's approach, at least as presented here, seems more driven by the politics of pragmatism and a conception of Quebec as "obviously unique."

During his decade-and-a-half as Prime Minister, Trudeau took pains to advance his vision of national identity and individual rights of Canadians, and won many converts. To expect liberals who adhered to this vision to simply abandon it and close ranks around Turner's opposite approach in the interests of the

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<sup>1</sup> John English, *Just Watch Me: The Life of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, 1968-2000* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2010); Max Nemni and Monique Nemni, *Trudeau Transformed: The Shaping of a Statesman 1944-1965* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2011).

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party would betray a rather partisan approach to the country. It would seem reasonable to argue that this was not solely petty in-fighting and sniping by previous and future leaders but a rather fundamental difference of conceptions of how Canada should be governed. While the media fed into this, the problems of Turner's leadership could be seen as going beyond organizational skills and personal loathing and instead as indicative of what was in some respects *two parties* vying for control of the Liberal brand and organization. These tensions persisted through the Chrétien and Martin governments and continue, in some respects, to dog the federal Liberal Party today. Moreover, some readers may find that Litt is a bit of a Turner apologist. The book is willing to brush off Turner's newsletters, sent during his legal career, that attacked the Trudeau government as being the product of Turner being too distracted and busy to note the damage that they were causing (212), while excoriating Trudeau and Chrétien for being "unrelentingly spiteful" (399) in their critiques and attacks of Turner.

Despite this critique, Litt's work is valuable. Readers will gain great insight into one faction of the Liberal Party of the 1960s-90s, and a wealth of material is offered regarding election campaigns, leadership races, and policy debates which take readers behind the scenes into the political backrooms and around the cabinet table. Our understanding of Liberal governance and opposition politics in these decades is greatly enhanced. There is also much to the argument that the media, particularly television reporters, played a central role in Canadian politics of these decades. They made and unmade the images of leaders who became ever more important to the successes of their political parties. But at the core, major issues related to ideas about Canada, its politics, and the nature of federalism that also played into the conflicts of these decades do not seem to get their fair due in this account. While the Liberal Party may have built its reputation and power through skilful brokerage of interests over the twentieth century, fundamental differences over what constitutes core liberal values and conceptions of Canada as a society continue to be a fundamental tension within the party. Turner, it seems, was unable to fully convince the party of the merits of his version of liberalism during his tenure.